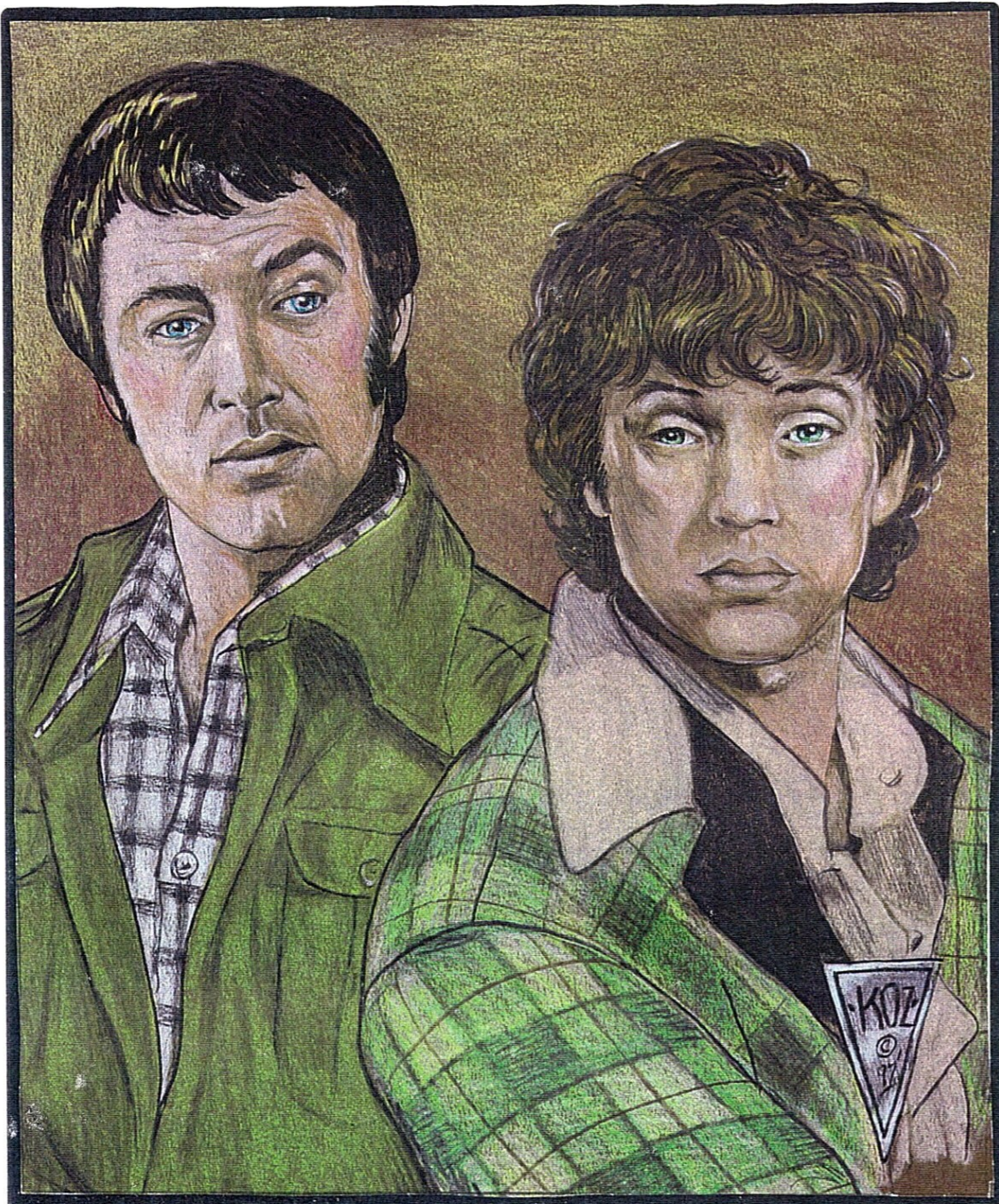


AWAKENINGS 4



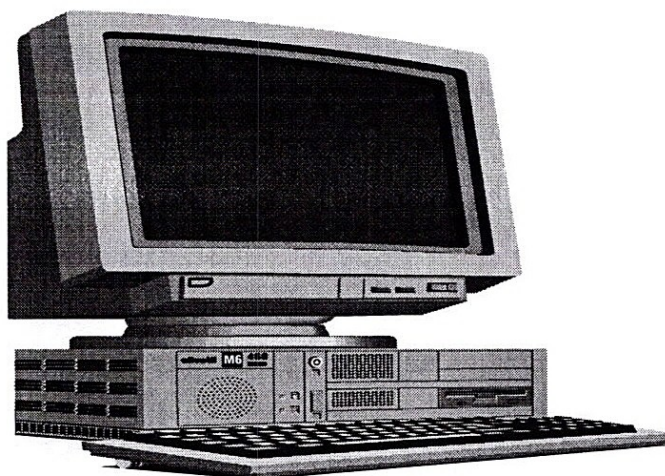
A MULTIMEDIA ZINE



AWAKENINGS

4

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Welcome to **AWAKENINGS 4**. Well — it's 1:00 a.m. I need to take the zine to the printer first thing in the morning, and once again, I'm staring at a blank screen. So what do I say this time? I've always hated writing editorials. I never know what to say, and this time is no different. I could say that I've enjoyed putting this issue together, but you already know that. I wouldn't have done it otherwise. I could say that I plan on doing it again — also true. I could say that contributors are welcome and the deadline for the next issue is April 30th, 1998. Any fandoms are welcome.

But most importantly, I'd like to thank my contributors. Without them there would have been no fanzine. I hope they will consider submit again to **AWAKENINGS**.

Comments are welcome, and in fact, encouraged. You can write me by mail or my e-mail address which is — Napasha@aol.com.

So go on now and read. Enjoy.

Marion

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Cover by Koz

THE MUSIC OF THE HEART



By Elessar

*In the music of the heart,
Nothing is as it seems.*

PRELUDE

"All right, gentlemen, it's time to discuss our problem candidates." George Cowley sat back and waited for one of the other three men in the room to comment. He didn't want to prejudice their remarks with his opinions.

Jack Crane decided to wade in. "Well, George, we started out with a couple of dozen top notch recruits in this intake, and we've cut nine, with half the training to go. Don't you think we've eliminated enough for now?"

"This is a special group; we've more power in our brief than has ever been bestowed before. We don't dare risk letting someone through who isn't up to the demands. One bad op, one major slip in the next couple of years, and CI5 will be dead in the water before it ever really begins. You've worked with them for the last eight weeks; who are the problems, and should we remove them now before we waste any more resources on them?"

MacMurtry, the psychologist Cowley had insisted on bringing in, spoke. "Right now, based on field reports and my testing, I'd say you've got four problems: Baker, Bodie, Doyle and Perkins.

"Baker and Bodie are loners and their psych profiles indicate that they aren't likely to be successfully partnered. Baker doesn't like people and he doesn't trust — anybody. He wants into CI5 solely because he likes the adrenaline rush of danger and thinks that this is the best legal way to get it."

"I don't want men high on danger for danger's sake. Much too likely to up the ante instead of backing off when the situation merits restraint. CI5 won't survive the first year with men like that. He's out." The Controller of CI5 was decisive; he'd brook no arguments, but looked around the group to see if anyone disagreed. No one did.

Cowley moved swiftly on to the next man on MacMurtry's list. "What about Bodie?"

"Well, he likes the adrenaline, but in the job you're training 'em for you're not likely to find men who don't, at least not who can do the job without freezing up. His SAS records show that he's not likely to intensify when the situation would be better served by backing off. He's still a loner, though. He comes from the SAS, and they work in

four-man teams, so he knows how to work with others; but he doesn't let anyone close, nor is he good at the give and take involved in a partnership. He can go in, do his job, and get out, but that's it: no involvement. He might do all right with solo ops, but I don't think he'd handle a partnership well. It risks getting involved, and that's something he avoids at all costs. With his childhood and experiences in Africa it's hardly surprising."

"Hmm ... I suppose I can use him there." Cowley didn't sound too pleased with the idea. "Still, this early on, I'd prefer men who work well in teams. What's he look like in training, Jack?"

"Very good, Major. Better than anyone else at just about everything in the military realm. Weapons, tactical, explosives, all the physical stuff as well. SAS training is top notch there. He's weak in police procedure and dealing with people. Been too long in structured environments where everyone follows orders. First in the merchant navy, then as a merc, and from there into the army — paras, SAS — he doesn't know how to work around people to get them to cooperate. Just tries to bluster his way through using intimidation." Jack paused at this point and Cowley was quick to realize that there was an observation he was reluctant to make.

"Out with it," Cowley pushed.

"Well, Bodie's good. Damn good and he knows it. He's arrogant and cocky and menacing; most of the other trainees are afraid of him — think he's a bit of a nutter — sometimes they aren't far off. I'm concerned that he's too distanced from the group, and that he won't be able to work closely with those he considers inferior."

"MacMurtry?" Cowley questioned.

"Given his history it's a valid concern. He doesn't talk about his childhood. He states the basic facts, and, when asked how he feels about his father's drinking or his mother's death, gives a standard textbook reply. If I were a betting man, I'd say he's

done some reading on the subject so he knows what we want to hear. He's smart, George, a lot smarter than he lets on, and he's been through a lot. I get the feeling that he's playing with my tests. Giving me just enough of the picture to satisfy but not really letting me get in to what's really inside. Hell, he might not even know, it's been walled off for so long. Given his childhood, it's amazing he's progressed as far as he has, and that he's as balanced as he is. But I don't know how close to a knife edge he's walking ... in truth I don't think he knows," the psychologist concluded. "You want my opinion. I'd keep him for now. He needs grounding, but with the qualities and skills he's shown I think he's worth the risk."

Cowley nodded and turned to Jack Crane. "He's too damn good to lose. Keep him, but keep a watchful eye on him."

"Doctor?" The Controller of CI5 questioned the physician, who had been silent until now.

"Physically he's A1. Keep him."

"Very well, gentlemen. It seems that Bodie has a temporary reprieve. Who is next?"

"Doyle," MacMurtry informed him and went on to present Doyle's profile. "Mentally — he's a tough call. There's a lot of pain, guilt, and anger there. Also, he's got a quick temper that could cause you trouble in the future."

"So, you're suggesting dropping him?" Cowley asked for clarification.

"No. I wouldn't go that far. He's working very hard to control the temper and seems to be managing quite well — most of the time. The anger has a basis in the way he was treated his last few months in the Met before beginning training with us. I'd say his anger is justified, and as long as he doesn't view CI5 as betraying him, you shouldn't have a problem keeping him in line. There's always a risk that the anger he feels could turn to bitterness; he could decide to sell out, but I don't think he will.

Give him a cause he believes in, treat him with respect, and the events and perceived betrayals of the last year will probably fade into the background; you'll have yourself a top notch agent."

Jack picked up the thread, "He's damn good in police procedure and can get just about any witness to talk. He reads people very well and presents himself in the best manner to get them to relax and open up. I think he'd make an excellent undercover operative. As for the rest, well, of course his training in demolitions, weapons, all that, isn't on par with that of those coming from a military background, but he's a quick study, damn good with a rifle, and better than anyone, including Bodie, with a handgun."

Here the trainer chuckled as he explained. "Bodie's not happy being bested by Doyle — not at all. A simple copper, outshooting him got up his nose no end first time it happened. Made him work all the harder; he'd been slacking back since he was so much better than most of the rest. Then Doyle outshoots him — cold ..." Jack chuckled again before finishing his story. "After that Bodie attacked everything with a vengeance. Still hasn't been able to best Doyle with a handgun, however."

"Doyle's also been involved in martial arts for several years and does very well in hand-to-hand. He's not the killing machine that the SAS men are, but he can hold his own against them in a fight, and he's not easily cowed." The training instructor smiled before concluding. "Actually, if you're keeping Bodie, you're going to have to keep Doyle as well. He's the only one left not intimidated by him and who is willing to take him on in hand-to-hand. You get rid of Doyle, and I'll have to spend my time sparring with Bodie. All the others are too intimidated to give him a run for his money."

Cowley turned to look at the doctor. His reply was the same for Doyle as for Bodie. "Reaction times are excellent, physical health A1. No medical reason not to keep him."

"All right," Cowley summarized their decision. "Doyle stays for the time being as well. And, as he's the only one who seems willing to stand up to Bodie, they can go through the partnership exercises together. Next ..."

And the discussion continued ...



William Bodie barreled through the training center offices, heading towards the outside. Behind him trailed a curly-haired man who shrugged in apology at their fellow trainees as they hurriedly got out of his 'partner's' way. *The way everyone swiftly moves when they see Bodie coming*, Ray thought, *the man could give lessons to a Centurion tank. Partner! Bloody hell, just what I need! What did I ever do for God to have such a down on me?* Trying to be as honest with himself as possible, he really couldn't think of a thing. *I've tried to be good. Honest! Yeah, well, there was that time ..., but still it really wasn't bad enough to deserve William Bodie as my just deserts... Was it? ... No!* he decided. *It definitely wasn't.*

Doyle reached out to stop another trainee from falling when he stumbled trying to clear out of the way of that nutter — the nutter who was now his partner! *Only eight weeks; surely I can make it to the end alive? It's only training after all.* He just wished he felt more secure about his longevity over the next few weeks; more exposure to William — "just call me Bodie" — was not what he needed right now. He sighed as he headed outside. They'd have to talk, to come to some sort of understanding. *Arrogant, tight-arsed prick!* As he followed the man towards the now-empty barracks to have it out, he played a game of thinking up other unflattering adjectives to describe this new **cherished** gift from the powers that be. *Bet they'd have put coal in Mother Teresa Christmas stocking, as well. Some Christmas present! If it's all the same I'd prefer the lump of coal.*

Bodie was furious. He didn't want or need a fucking partner. Especially some anal-retentive copper whose only point in his favor was that he could shoot. *All right. Maybe he's decent at hand-to-hand as well, but how would he be in a real fight, under real fire? Probably piss his pants that's what!*

'The SAS was bad enough but at least you had a team ... didn't have to get sodding close to them. Just work with them. And they were well trained — not a copper with a mere two months of real training. FUCK!' Bodie had disliked coppers from childhood. As far as he was concerned, they were either bent or power-mad — he definitely wasn't about to trust one as his sodding partner. He thought back to the lecture they'd received from the old man that morning just before partner assignments had been handed out. Cowley had said a partnership was just like a marriage, that in point of fact it was often closer than most marriages. *Well, I'm not marrying Doyle!* He slammed into the barracks on that thought and was surprised when he tried to bang the door shut behind him to find that the copper had followed him from the meeting.

His anger at its peak, he attacked Doyle. "Fuck off, copper. I'm not going to be your bleeding partner."

Doyle glared at him, then the next thing Bodie knew he was looking up at the brown-haired man and his jaw ached like hell. Seeing that the copper had backed off and wasn't going to pursue the attack, Bodie decided not to move. Yet. Doyle nodded at him before speaking.

"Good, now that I've got your attention, we're going to get a few things straight. I know you don't want me as a partner — actually, you've made it pretty obvious that you're so superior to the rest of us poor sods that no one meets your high and exacting standards — well, tough shit. You're stuck with me for the next eight weeks so learn to live with it, Mister Sweet-Tempered Bloody Sunshine."

He said, sarcasm dripping from his voice, "You're not on the top of my list as partner material either. In fact, you'd run a distant second to Jack the Ripper. He at least had a sense of humor. But I want this job. I want to work in CI5, and if I have to make do with the devil himself to get in, then I bloody well will." His tone made it quite clear that he thought the devil would be an improvement over the man on the floor in front of him.

"So, Perfect Soldier Boy, do the fucking job and don't get in my way. I'll pin your balls up on the notice board if I don't pass the training course because of you. After that, you can fuck off for all I care, and we'll be done with each other."

Ray Doyle spun on his heels and headed for the door, but was stopped halfway through opening it by the sound of laughter coming from the floor. He turned to see Bodie doubled up on himself, overcome with amusement. Doyle felt like beating the crap out of him and, before he could think, moved to do just that. The dark-haired man sat up, sobered up a bit, and held up his hands, palms out, in surrender.

He said, trying to contain his laughter, "God, but you're a sarky little sod when you're riled." He laughed again and, as Doyle shifted, possibly to have another go at him, he rubbed his sore jaw and continued on a more serious note, "Give it a rest, Doyle. I'm not going to sit still and let you have another go at me. One free shot is all you get, and we'll both be kicked out if we start a brawl here in the barracks." The copper just glared at him as he went on, "Okay. You win. I'll cooperate and we'll work together to pass the rest of the training. After that we're on our own, and you'll back me up when I request to go solo. Deal?"

Staring hard at the ex-SAS man, Doyle finally nodded and reached down his hand to help him up. "Deal. For the next eight weeks we're partners; after that you're on your own."



He'd passed! Raymond Doyle was ecstatic. CI5! The best of the best. He wished his dad was still alive to be proud of him. First he'd tell Bodie — *Bodie's bound to have made it, he was at the top of the class* — then he'd call his mum ... An unpleasant thought intruded to take some of the shine off the day.

Bodie. He'd promised him back at the beginning of the partner training that he'd support his petition to go solo. He wouldn't go back on his word, but it was going to be damn hard to make do with anyone else when he'd had the best. Smiling, he remembered slugging Bodie to get his attention that first day as partners. *Never try that now; have my head on a platter, he would.* Now that Doyle thought about it, he was surprised that he'd got away with it the first time. But that punch had won him the ex-SAS man's respect, and they'd worked well together. It was a damn shame that Bodie didn't want to be partnered, 'cause, after the initial adjustments, he'd made a damn good one.

Well, it's not the end of the world, and I imagine I'll get to work with him on and off anyway. 'Sides, working that close with him just might not be a good idea. Doyle headed out to find his ex-partner and then a phone.



He'd made it — was there ever any doubt? Bodie paused to realize that there might have been. A couple of the other trainees with a military background had washed out because they couldn't adjust to dealing with people who didn't have to take orders. With arms and combat maneuvers, physically, they were fine, but trying to take a statement, getting a witness to talk, following police procedure so that some criminal wouldn't be let off on a technicality, they hadn't been able to perform at the level George Cowley demanded. Bodie knew that the only reason he'd been able to was that Doyle had taken a lot of extra time helping him in those areas. Bodie still wasn't anywhere near as good as the curly-haired golly,

but he'd passed because of him.

What was most surprising to the new three point seven wasn't that he'd needed help to pass but that he'd been able to take the help without resentment or feeling threatened. He couldn't remember ever not feeling threatened by needing that much help, or not being hostile to someone who'd tried to help him as Ray had — much less letting them actually help — Bodie didn't like having to depend on anyone. But for some reason it'd been different with Doyle. Maybe it was the fact that Doyle had been willing to admit to his own weak areas and accept help from him as well. Bodie didn't know, and wasn't in the mood for self-examination, but he owed the man one and was going to let him know it.

Finding Doyle on the phone, he stood by and listened as four-five received congratulations from his mother. He had to fight not to snicker. Ray's mother was obviously huffed and was being rather effusive about, it if his partner's reaction was anything to go by. The man's look as he talked on the phone was one of embarrassed humility. *At the rate he's going, he's going to scuff his shoe across the ground at any minute. Only a mother could do that,* Bodie smirked to himself.

Seeing Bodie standing nearby, Doyle managed to cut the call short with a promise to call later on that weekend.

Bodie spoke first. "So I take it you passed?"

"Yeah. You too? As if there was ever any doubt."

"Was a lot of doubt and you know it. I owe you one, Doyle, and I pay my debts. So what do you want?" Bodie hated to be beholden to anyone.

Doyle's mouth spoke before his brain could engage. "Stay my partner." He clamped his lips shut, refusing to beg, and not wanting Bodie to think that he was breaking their bargain he changed the subject, concluding, "I'll go with you to Mr. Cowley's office and request a new pairing.

Should make it easier for you that way."

Stay with me. The words seemed locked in Bodie's brain, echoing over and over, and he knew there was only one answer. He didn't want to analyze why, refused to look at his motives or reasons, didn't let himself think before speaking. "All right, Sunshine, we're even. You've got yourself a partner." The smile that met his statement brought back old memories and desires. *Doyle should smile more often. Does wonders for his looks.*

Without thinking, he put his arm across his new partner's shoulder and steered him towards his car. "You don't have any wheels down here so I'll give you a lift back to town. Got all your stuff in that bag?" He nodded at the duffle bag that Ray had bent to pick up.

"Yeah, all set to go; was waiting on the bus to take me back. Car would be a treat."

"Fine. What say when we get back we get cleaned up and go for a pint? Know this pub, it's near this office that's mostly all women, very nice hunting on a Friday night." He rubbed the palms of his hands together and raised his eyebrows in an unmistakable leer to indicate the type of hunting he was referring to.

"Sounds just the thing, partner," Doyle agreed.



George Cowley watched in bemusement and irritation as Bodie and Doyle exited his office Monday morning after having received their first assignment. It was a very simple, low-priority surveillance of a minor Bulgarian official — who might or might not be involved in espionage. And they hadn't protested at all. Bodie'd looked pained, of course, but not a word came out, and Doyle just nodded in a very professional manner and took the file containing the details. Their lack of protest was a bit surprising. Psych profiles for both agents

indicated that they'd want to jump in at the deep end, so calm acceptance of such a low-priority assignment was out of the norm.

But the aspect that threw him the most, and got up his nose, was that neither man had requested reteaming. The Controller had already lined up a new partner for Doyle and a solo op for Bodie at the end of the week. Nothing very risky; he wanted to give his agents time to get used to how CI5 was going to operate before putting them on high risk jobs. But instead of the demand to split the team that he'd expected — especially from Bodie — they took the case quietly and functioned as if they planned to remain paired.

Here I am willing to be flexible and they decide they don't want reteaming. He felt indignant at the fact, like he'd been cheated of the chance to show that he wasn't the autocrat that he'd been accused of being. Cowley quickly shifted mental gears and chose different operatives for his other assignments, deciding to let Bodie and Doyle stay together for a bit longer. They just might make an efficient team after all.



OVERTURE

The woman on the tape finished speaking, her voice fading out to be replaced by Doyle's voice. Bodie heard just two words. "Sorry, Bodie." Then nothing more. Ray had never doubted him, nor Cowley either. They'd covered his back and saved his arse on faith alone. The whole situation still stank, hurt like hell, but their belief in him made it bearable.

Bodie shut off the tape, got up, returned it to the pile on Cowley's desk, and headed out of CI5 headquarters. It had been a little over twelve hours since he'd had to watch his old lover gunned down in a plot to place an MI6 mole deep in East German Security. He'd waited till he was sure everyone would be gone to come in, read the

reports, and hear the tapes. Bodie didn't want to face anyone yet; he needed to get a handle on his emotions first. If not for his own skills, and Doyle and Cowley's support and maneuvering, it would have been him dead or in jail.

He checked his watch and realized that the pubs were closed — it was after two — so he drove around aimlessly for an hour. That was all he seemed to have been doing since it happened. Tomorrow — no, today — he'd have to go in and give his report. Admit to everyone that he'd been an easy mark when Marikka had shown up. The irony of it was that he wasn't even sure that he really loved her, at least not any more; he'd just wanted to recapture a time when he felt connected to someone, loved by someone. He needed to care and be cared about.

Cowley's use of him and Doyle as Judas goats for a fake Arab politician had affected him more than he realized at the time. His partner could have been killed, and he was still furious about the incident. Marikka had been a chance to escape back to a simpler time. Some escape. She was dead and he felt more alone than ever.

Pulling the car over and stopping, he realized that he was outside Doyle's flat. Three-bloody-fifteen in the morning was not a time for social calls. As he put the car in gear to pull out, he noticed that there was a light on. Maybe he should have left well enough alone, but at the sight of that light he found himself at Doyle's door and ringing the buzzer before he was even aware of getting out of the car. A curtain twitched back into place and the door was swiftly opened.

Doyle didn't seem in the least surprised to see him, and it was obvious from his attire and alert look that he hadn't yet been to bed. *Must have been waiting up for me. Gee, thanks, Mum*, he thought to himself but held his tongue; he'd left his partner standing over twelve hours ago and Bodie was well aware that prolonged worry would not have improved Ray's mood. His partner was still a saarky little sod at the best of times.

God, I feel so tired, Bodie thought. *Can't remember when I last slept.*

He opened his mouth to say something but snapped it closed because he found nothing to say. Ray pulled him inside and pushed him down into an old armchair that had seen better days. Bodie looked around the room. *Looks like Ray's finished unpacking; this place is one of the dumpiest he's had yet.* Bodie hoped for Ray's sake that he wouldn't be stuck here long.

Doyle didn't seem in the mood to talk either; instead, he set about making tea and a sandwich for Bodie. He ate in silence. When he'd finished, Doyle pulled him to his feet, took him to the door to the bog, handed him a pair of pajamas, and left him to get ready for bed. Bodie came out to find his partner waiting for him. Ray steered him to the far side of the bed, climbed in beside him, and turned out the light. Both men were quickly asleep. Bodie's last thought as he drifted off to sleep was that he'd finally come home.



The next eighteen months saw Bodie more content with his lot than he had been before. There hadn't been a startling revelation but just a growing gentle awareness that he was happiest with his partner. They did their usual round of dating, but the times he enjoyed most were those he spent with Ray.

The only cloud on his existence was the fact that he felt he cared for Raymond Jeremy Doyle more than his partner cared for him. Bodie knew that he appeared detached. He had rarely let anyone close since his days as a merc in Africa, but he had realized early in their partnership that Doyle, who on the surface seemed more accessible, was just as bad if not worse at letting anyone get close to where it really mattered.

He doubted that Ray was aware of the distance he maintained from everyone, but part of him seemed

desperate to tear down the walls he had constructed around himself. It revealed itself in his over-riding need to commit to some woman. It'd certainly got worse of late, and Bodie could see the cycle. Doyle would seem to fall, get serious for a bit, and then the bird would give him the shove. Curious after what seemed the dozenth time it had happened, he arranged to date a couple of his partner's old girl friends. The answer was always the same — the job got in the way. But Bodie, being Bodie, dug deeper and realized that, although his partner gave that impression, the real reason had something to do with both women not feeling that Ray would let them close to him. They'd subconsciously felt that he held them at a distance and that the relationship was going nowhere: thus they were unwilling to tolerate the broken dates and odd hours. Bodie had sighed to himself upon reaching that conclusion. He knew just how they felt. Unfortunately he was too deeply involved with the golly to willingly get out.

He loved the cold sod, and if being with him meant that he was always standing on the outside looking in, well, being with Ray was worth it, and, besides, it allowed him to maintain some distance from the person he knew could hurt him most. So they did their jobs, hunted birds together, and Bodie was content.

At least until King Billy and then Ann Holly came along.



Bodie knew that Doyle was mad at him. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that his partner was going to rip into him when they finally got alone in Bodie's flat. It had been only hours ago that Cowley and Doyle had stopped him from killing the sodding bastard. *Yeah, right! As if I could*, he thought to himself.

Medical leave, for the next week at least, with probably months of talking to a trick cyclist. Bodie wasn't in the mood, but he'd never get away with

not letting the headshrinkers at him ... not without telling the truth, and he wasn't about to do that. The truth was more than likely to get him fired, and he was chagrined to find that that really did matter to him after all. Being fired would mean losing Doyle, and he was quickly coming to the conclusion that if that happened he really would have a death wish.

Doyle pulled up outside his flat and parked. *There goes the hope that he's so mad at me he'll drop me off and head home in a snit*, Bodie sighed to himself. *Just one more lie to tell.*

Once inside the flat, Bodie decided on embarrassed penitence.

"I'm sorry, Doyle. I just lost it."

"Don't! Don't even think about lying to me, you fucking bastard, or I'll finish what those bikers couldn't do." Doyle absentmindedly rubbed his gut, the memory of Bodie hitting him still obviously fresh in his mind. He was not happy with his partner, not one little bit.

"I'm not lying. I just lost perspective ..."

Ray shoved him hard against the door. "You can fool Ross. This time you even fooled Cowley into thinking that you'd cracked up, but don't try that bullshit on me. I know you, Bodie, a lot better than you think, and I know that you planned this from the very beginning. Each and every step of the way. I'm the man who's out there with you every day, and I know what you're capable of." His partner emphasized every word with a poke to Bodie's chest. "You want everyone to think that you're just dumb muscle, but you can be one of the best damn tacticians when you want — so don't give me any more crap!" Ray gave him another, harder, poke and then pushed off and started prowling around the room. He reminded Bodie of a big cat on the look-out for dinner, and he had a feeling that he was going to be Doyle's meal tonight.

"All right, so I planned to get Billy. Probably even kill him. I know you don't understand the need to avenge a mate, but, damn it, Ray, Williams didn't deserve to die like — "

"You shut me out," Doyle shouted at his partner. "You should have let me help you, let me know what was going on in that stubborn head of yours."

"Why? So you could stop me?"

"No, God damn it, so I could help you."

"You wouldn't — "

"Damn it to hell, Bodie, don't you know by now that I'd kill for you?" Ray's voice was soft and harsh and all the more fearful for that. The words rang of truth. "Haven't you figured that out yet? If you'd have told me your plan — you're right, I'd have stopped you — not because of the plan to kill Billy but because I know that you'd never be able to go through with it. You almost got yourself and that girl killed because you can't kill in cold blood like that." Doyle paused a minute to get a handle on the fear that almost overwhelmed him. It'd been too damn close! "To save my life or an innocent person — yeah. But to set up a murder so that you'll look like you lost your rag, got yourself into trouble, and had to kill defending yourself? No way."

"You'd always know that it was a lie." Doyle walked back to Bodie and grasped his shoulders. "I know you think you're a hard man, but you aren't a murderer." Ray shook him. "You'd have had to be damn near dead before you'd let your instincts take over and really take those men out. By that time it might have been too late, and you would have ended up dead."

"You're just lucky the Cow found out. Me, I couldn't figure out what was going on; I knew you were up to something, but I was stupid and naive enough to think that if it was really serious you'd confide in me. I thought our partnership **meant** something. That when things got really bad we

could ask each other for help. That we **would** ask!" Ray moved away from Bodie and paced some more. He was hurt. The closeness he'd thought he had with Bodie was apparently one-sided. He could and had relied on Bodie, turned to him when he needed help, but Bodie was still on his own, refusing to turn to him when he needed someone. Needing to adjust to this new revelation, he turned to say goodbye to his partner, but Bodie had moved and was staring out the window. *Maybe we can talk tomorrow?* Ray thought as he headed out the door. The pain was too sharp and fresh to face tonight.

Bodie, who was trying to adjust to the reality that Doyle cared more than he'd ever realized, cringed as he heard the door softly close. He spoke to the closed door. "I do care, sunshine. I just didn't want to drag you down with me if something went wrong." Gazing out the window, he watched Ray climb into his car and drive away. *He knows me better than I know myself.* He was not comforted by the thought; too much baggage went with it.

Turning, he headed for bed, depressed at the realization that the caring that he'd wanted from Ray had been there all along. He'd just been too locked in to the belief that Doyle didn't feel the same way, and had therefore missed all the signs of just how deeply his partner felt. Giving their relationship a few weeks to get over the King Billy incident and settle back into a more normal pattern seemed like a good idea to Bodie right now. They could talk about things in a few weeks

Bodie went to bed.



He couldn't stand still, and he couldn't concentrate. Bodie wanted to know what was going on between Ann and Ray. He glared at Cowley's back. The old man had said not to interfere between four-five and his girl. To let them work it out. Well, he damn well didn't want them to bloody work it out. He wanted Ray for himself, and he'd been a fool to

let things come between them like he had the past month.

The King Billy incident had been bad enough, but then Bodie'd been taken prisoner by a group of terrorists and had a bomb strapped to his chest. When CI5 had sprung their trap Bodie'd run away from Doyle to keep his partner from getting blown up along with him. He couldn't bear the thought of Ray dying. Unfortunately his action had driven them even further apart. He could still hear his partner's words just before he'd stormed off. "Didn't it ever occur to you that I'd rather go out trying to save you than be left on my own having watched you being blown to bits?" He'd tried to stop Ray, but his partner had shoved him away and stormed off, and, before Bodie could move to follow, Cowley had called him. Doyle was gone when he'd finally gotten free.

First mistake had been lying to Ray about Billy, second was deciding to back off to let them get their perspective back, third was to run from Doyle instead of turning to him for help — yet again — and the final one had been to back off again to give things time to settle. He hated to fight with his partner so he tended to want things to calm down. Trouble was that Ray took it as rejection, and in his returned loneliness reached out to the first reasonable option he could find. It all added up to the Holly bitch. He knew that wasn't fair. She was a beautiful woman and might have done well with Ray if he hadn't already belonged to Bodie. But belong to him he did since the day that Doyle had knocked him flat on his arse and made Bodie realize there was more to the copper than he'd bothered to notice. Like grit and determination and ... beautiful green eyes that looked too deep into his soul. Bodie shook himself; that kind of distraction he did not need right now. But Ray was his, and one way or another he was going to make sure that Ann Holly was cut out of Doyle's life ASAP.

Looking out the window again, he watched her drive away. He didn't give a damn what Cowley said, he was going to Ray now. She'd missed her

chance, and when she changed her mind later, she was going to find out it was too damn late.

Joining Ray, he tried to touch him and give some comfort. Ray shrugged him off, and, even though his gut told him it was a mistake, he started to walk away yet again to give Doyle the space he seemed to need. He'd not got very far when he heard his partner call his name. Stopping, he waited for Ray to catch up with him and was surprised to find an arm around his shoulders giving him a hug.

"Think it's about time we talked. Don't you, sunshine?" Ray asked.

Bodie leaned into the hug and nodded. Ray'd forgiven him, and this time he was not going to blow it. His throat was suddenly so dry that words wouldn't come.

"My place or yours?" Doyle finally queried when it became obvious that Bodie wasn't going to say anything.

"Mine," was the one-word reply. Bodie did not want to be reminded of Ann Holly while they had this talk, and he sure didn't want Ray reminded of her.

They didn't talk much on the drive over. A few inconsequential topics: sports, traffic, and the like. They studiously avoided any mention of the case or Ann.

Bodie took a shower while Ray prepared breakfast, and then, as Bodie cleaned up the kitchen after they'd eaten, Ray showered. When his partner came out of the bog, three-seven was surprised to see that he'd put on an old bathrobe rather than the spare pair of jeans that he kept at the flat.

Ray smiled at Bodie's obvious confusion and motioned for him to sit down on one end of the couch. Ray then sat in an armchair next to him. This way they were close and could easily look into each other's face, yet weren't distracted by

touching. Then he started talking.

"We haven't been communicating very well of late. Have we?"

"Not very — no. Both our faults, I suppose," Bodie reluctantly admitted.

"Truth time?" He waited for Bodie to nod his agreement before continuing. "You didn't know till King Billy how I felt about you, did you?"

Bodie wasn't comfortable with discussing how he felt, how they felt. He tried to avoid the subject, "We're best mates." He wouldn't meet Doyle's eyes.

"It's more than that, sunshine, and by now you should damn well know it." Ray grabbed Bodie's knee and squeezed it.

"Yeah, Ann told me a whole lot," Bodie snapped at his partner, the hurt still very fresh.

"She ought to have. Twasn't me who mentioned marriage."

Opening his mouth to protest, the dark-haired man stopped when Doyle held up his hand for Bodie to listen. "You mentioned it. I just didn't disagree. Liked her, might even have loved her a bit, but I think she was more an attempt to get under your skin." He paused and glanced up into dark blue eyes. "Seems to have worked. Just wish I'd realized at the time what I was doing. Wasn't fair to any of us." A little grin crossed his face.

Glaring at Ray, Bodie was still inclined to argue. "And what was this for, then?" he queried, rubbing his jaw, the memory of the pain inflicted both mentally and physically still lingering.

"Was mad at you — "

"No kidding — "

"Not like that, you dumb crud. Twas mad that you

wouldn't admit how you felt. Used Cowley to give you an excuse to snoop though — didn't you?"

Bodie knit his brow, considering Ray's accusation, his head tipped to one side. "Maybe... Never gave it much thought. I wasn't the only one." He glared accusingly at Doyle.

Their telepathy worked again — Ray knew exactly what he was referring to. "Marikka was the old man's idea — "

"You could have told me — "

"Well, if I hadn't been so damn worried about you, I would have done, but your head was somewhere else — wasn't sure I could get through, and you could have mentioned her to me. Only reason you told me about Ann was to get up my nose."

"I told you cause you were getting up the Cow's nose."

"And to cause trouble." Doyle wasn't about to let him off the hook on this one.

A little-boy grin crept across Bodie's face. "Was being nasty — wasn't I?"

"You know how to get up my nose faster than anyone else. Must mean I care more for you than anyone else." Ray grinned back.

As a declaration of undying love it wasn't very coherent, certainly far from explicit, but Bodie got the message. "Feeling's mutual, Ray." He took a deep breath and debated his next statement. He was tired as hell, the whole day had taken on a dream-like quality, but he didn't want this chance to get away. Didn't want them to have time for second thoughts and backing away. "So you going to spend the rest of the day sitting over there?" He raised his eyebrow at the end in invitation.

Ray didn't need a second offer. Before Bodie could say another word, he found his partner had relocated himself to the couch beside him. After

that, it just seemed natural to take his green-eyed love into his arms, and their lips met in a kiss.

It was gentle at first; Bodie kissed Ray's lips and pulled away before the kiss could deepen. He then began to kiss the rest of Doyle's face: forehead, eyelids, cheeks, then back to his lips. Bodie wanted to avoid thinking — thinking, he knew, would lead to fear and panic, and he didn't want to blow what might be their only chance. Neither he nor Ray handled caring very well. Too many betrayals, too much loneliness, for either to be comfortable with real commitment. But committed they were, and if they could just make it over this last hurdle, then they'd have something that might last — maybe even a lifetime. For the first time in a long time, Bodie was willing to take the risk. He pulled back and looked hard into his partner's eyes. The smile and contentment he saw there told him that Ray was ready to do the same.

Ray's hand came up to cup the side of Bodie's head, letting his thumb tease the soft surface of his partner's lips. The dark-haired man opened his lips slightly and sucked the thumb into his mouth. He heard Doyle sigh. Bodie let his hands roam over his partner's body: down his arms, over to his chest — he felt a nipple harden under his probing fingers — down to his belly, and finally to the erection swiftly hardening between Ray's legs. Whatever trepidation his partner had, had been overcome by the strength of their attraction and caring.

"God, Bodie, I love you." The words escaped from his lips before his brain had time to analyze them.

Bodie's body responded to those words with a steel-hard erection; his heart melted. His lips let go of the thumb, and he shoved Ray down on the couch, covering his body with his own and capturing his partner's lips. He nibbled first on Ray's lower lip and then allowed his tongue to explore the delightful mouth. As his hands tried to explore his partner's body he sighed in frustration. There was not enough room on the sofa to reach all the good bits. At least not without bumping into

everything or falling off. Their first time should be special, he decided, not a quick grapple on the couch, and for that they needed more room. "Bedroom, sunshine?" Bodie questioned.

Ray's only answer was a broad smile as they stood up; he turned and led the way to his partner's bedroom.

They entered and began to undress. Nervous, Doyle made idle conversation. "So what happened to that fur thing you used to have on the bed?"

When Bodie didn't answer right away Ray turned to look at him; he was surprised to see the bigger man looking chagrined.

Bodie knew by the look on Doyle's face that he'd have to tell his partner something. Ray could never let anything go — especially where it concerned his partner. He opted for short and to the point.

"This bird I dated a couple of months ago ... well ... ummm ... she liked whip-cream and cherries" Bodie's voice faded off, hoping that Doyle would fill in the rest. By the look of confusion on his partner's face, he still hadn't a clue. *Damn it, Ray, don't be so naive.*

"She liked to eat her dessert off something besides a dish. Okay? Cherry juice makes a big mess so I put the fur up and never got round to getting it out again." Bodie turned away, not wanting to meet his partner's look and teasing.

Glancing back, he saw Ray heading towards the bedroom door. "Hey, where you off to?"

"Saw some left in the fridge ..."

Seeing the grin on his partner's face, Bodie took two steps, and, grabbing Ray, he pulled him into an embrace. "Get back here, Goldilocks. Save the dessert for when we've had a little more of the main course. And when we get around to it, **you** can be the first dessert plate special."

"S'long as it's not cherries jubilee," Doyle snorted in reply.

Bodie's confession had released the tension in the room and restored their lost comradery. The pain and hurt of the last few weeks slowly faded. Each knew this was not someone he had to impress, to put on a show for; it was his best mate, someone who knew all the good and all the bad about him. No masks were needed; they could be themselves. They discovered that love was best this way.

Neither man spoke again for a very long time. They used their bodies to communicate all the love and caring that they couldn't bring themselves to express verbally.

Finally, naked, they stretched out side-by-side on the bed. Two strong, tough men; two tentative, gentle lovers. They'd waited so long, wanted so long, that the touching took on a dream-like quality. Bodie was the first to gather his wits and desire about him. He pushed his partner onto his back and cuddled up close to his side. One of Ray's arms was around the bigger man and could only stroke the blue-eyed man's back and buttocks — he took full advantage of the opportunity — while with his other arm he reached up to touch the body to the side and slightly above him. Bodie shoved the arm down to his side, briefly holding it there.

"Lie still. You can have your turn in a minute." With that, Bodie leaned over and began to nibble on his lover's neck. His lips slid slowly down to one of Ray's nipples; his hand was not idle — it was stroking up his partner's thigh to his groin. He avoided the hard shaft — he wanted this to last — and concentrated on his partner's balls and inner thighs, with first feather touches, then strokes, and finally, gentle squeezes. His lover's legs fell apart to give him better access. Never one to pass up an opportunity, Bodie allowed his hand to sink lower, teasing the delicate ring of muscle, pushing gently into the tight channel. Ray arched up and groaned as one finger penetrated him, tossing his head from side to side.

Not yet, sunshine, but soon. Bodie smiled to himself in anticipation. He'd been with men before — not in a long time, but still, one never quite forgot — that had been sex, this was love, the difference between vinegar and champagne. He'd never had the champagne of love before and he found it had gone to his head — he was drunk before he'd barely begun.

Moving his finger slowly in and out, the dark-haired man continued his assault on Ray's chest, leisurely moving down with gentle kisses until he could lick the head of his lover's penis. However, before he could take the hard organ into his mouth, his partner gave a shout, and hot liquid shot out across his belly.

Bodie sighed. "That's wasteful, you know."

He snickered, as one green eye popped open and glared at him; it closed quickly, and a groan came from Doyle's lips. After a couple of deep, shuddering breaths, Ray spoke. "You don't want it to go to waste, don't be so damned sexy. God, that was heaven!" He snuggled in closer to his partner and pretended to be going to sleep.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Bodie queried, amused at his lover's gentle teasing. He felt the mouth that was resting in his armpit smile.

"Don't know; am I?" Ray mumbled into his chest.

"This wasn't supposed to be DIY — you know?"

The snicker that his lover released tickled Bodie's pit. He complained, as he shoved Ray's head away, "Give over. That tickles."

Doyle rose up and rolled on top of his partner. The broad teasing smile changed, as he looked down at the man stretched out beneath him, to one of yearning hunger. No longer willing to wait, he pounced. "My turn now, lover."

Where Bodie had been gentle — almost hesitant — Ray was wild with an all-consuming hunger.

He bit, and licked, every inch of skin that he could reach; his hands stroked, then kneaded the flesh beneath him. As he slid down his partner's torso with his lips, his hands grasped Bodie's arse — one hand pulled him tight and the other slid round to spread his lover's legs and enter him. As the digit penetrated him Ray's mouth closed over the blue-eyed man's erection. The finger probed deep, the mouth sucked hard — once, twice — and Bodie screamed as he shot hot velvet into his partner's waiting mouth.

When he came back to himself he looked down the bed at Ray. His lover gave a gentle lick to Bodie's shrinking organ and raised up; a trace of semen trickled out of the side of his mouth, a tongue flicked out to lick it away. *He looks like a tiger finishing off a dish of cream*, Bodie mused to himself. Doyle was looking very self-satisfied. Bodie smirked back.

"Enjoy your dinner, mate?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Best ever, lover," was Ray's reply. "Shan't ever want anything else." It was a vow.

"Spoiled for anything else — are you?" A tentative query from Bodie. He wanted this to be more than a one-off.

"Aren't you?" Ray wanted to commit, but words always came hard to him — especially after the last few days. He leaned in and gave his partner a long, deep kiss of commitment. "Nothing else will ever be as good."

Bodie smiled, satisfied; he drifted off to sleep.

Ray snuggled in close to his partner and smirked. Ending up like this made the last few weeks worth all the anger and pain. He quickly followed his lover into sleep.



"Ah, shit!" The ring of the phone beside the bed was the last thing Bodie wanted to wake up to. *And it'd been such a lovely dream, too*. He sighed, wishing that someday he and Ray would have the courage to actually do something about how they felt. He rolled over and answered the phone, still far from fully awake and coherent.

"Bodie," he identified himself, giving the niceties a pass. At the same time as he spoke, an arm came around his waist, a warm body suddenly pressed along his back, and a sharp nip at his neck made him realize that he was not alone. He strove to remember the name of the bird and glanced down at the arm for a clue. One look at the hairy, muscular arm beginning to stroke his cock shocked him. It hadn't been a dream! Ignoring the fact that someone was on the line, an expletive escaped him, "Bloody hell!"

The voice at the other end of the line registered irritation. "Mr. Bodie, this is Ann Holly. Is Ray there?"

The bottom started to fall out of his world. He wanted to deny her a chance of getting back into his partner's life. But what could he offer compared to a beautiful, intelligent woman? Besides, Ray was close enough to hear who it was and who she wanted. He sat up, pulling away from Doyle, and handed him the phone. As he tried to stand to get away from the pain of losing Ray to her — after all, his partner would have to be nuts to chose a man who was terrified of commitments, who had failed at every serious relationship he'd ever tried, and with whom a liaison could get him fired from his job — Doyle's arm snaked again around his waist and held him tight. He couldn't move without starting a wrestling match, and the strength of Ray's grip told him that that was exactly what would happen if he tried. He stopped struggling, resigned to listening to his own execution.

"Lo, Ann. What can I do for you?"

"I've been thinking. We need to talk."

Of course she's been thinking, Bodie thought sarcastically. *She'd have to be bloody stupid to give up Ray, and stupid is not a name I'd call her.*

Bodie fought to keep his rising panic down and to listen to the conversation. Ray's answer was cautious. "Thought we'd said it all this morning."

"I was mad and upset. I don't like being used ..."

"I never used you to get to your father, but when I saw the picture connecting him to a drug runner, I couldn't very well ignore it. Do you have any idea of the kind of damage drugs do, especially to kids?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry. I'd like for us to try and work this out. Maybe now that you know I'm not involved you can start to ..." Obviously realizing how that sounded, she amended what she was going to say. "We can learn to trust each other." When he was slow to reply she pleaded, "Please, Ray."

Ray sat up and Bodie attempted to use his movement to get away, but his partner was too fast for him; his arm was quickly back around Bodie and pulling him up close against his body. The dark-haired man surrendered and leaned back against the strong, warm body. He listened in relief to Ray's reply.

"I'm sorry, but it wouldn't work. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life apologizing for my job. We're able to make a difference, and I'm proud of that. Your attitude towards the necessities of the job — "

"It's not like that ... I never meant you to ... it's true that I don't like the violence, but still ... Ray, I love you."

"No, love, you only love part of me, not all of me. I need someone who loves me, every last little bit, not someone who needs to wear blinders to avoid the unpleasant bits." With these words Bodie felt a gentle kiss on the back of his neck and Ray's arm

tightened around him. He couldn't stop a grunt from escaping — Ray was very strong.

Ann, hearing it, felt fear and anger. This should have been so easy; if she could forgive Ray then he could surely forgive her; after all she was the wronged party! She struck out. "Is that Bodie? Couldn't he give you a little privacy?"

I wanted to, sweetheart; this front row seat was lover-boy's idea, Bodie thought to himself with vexation. Ray had not lessened his hold one little bit.

She went on, "Well. Don't we even deserve a face-to-face meeting?"

"I'm sorry but there's really no point ..."

"I suppose that you think CI5's enough ... Well, just remember, when you're lonely in your bed at night and reach out in the dark to find no one there, that you gave up on us — not me."

"I'm sorry, it just won't — " Before Ray could say more, Ann attacked in hurt and anger but made the mistake of going after Bodie instead of Ray.

"That thug you call a partner isn't likely — "

Doyle saw red. Nobody, but nobody, was allowed to hurt or criticize his Bodie. He interrupted her tirade with one of his own. "That so-called thug has more compassion and caring and genuine acceptance than you could ever hope to know. And as for a cold, lonely bed, you're the only one who has to worry about that. I've found someone to fill my nights. It's over, Ann, let it go." He hung up to the sound of silence.

Bodie sighed. "You didn't have to be quite so hard there. She's hurting and didn't mean — "

"I know just what she meant, and no one says that about you." Ray used both arms to pull his partner into a tighter hug. "No one."

"Shhh. 'S going to be okay. She can't hurt me, not unless she takes you away from me, and I'm beginning to get the feeling that there is no chance of that?"

"Only you for me, sunshine. Now and always." Ray's words were a solemn vow.

Bodie answered, "Now and always."

No more words were spoken as they sealed their love with their bodies. No matter what came, they would face it together.



SYMPHONY

First Movement: DUET

Ray Doyle woke abruptly, feelings of dread and depression settling about him like a cloud. It didn't take long to remember the source of his distress. Cowley. They were going to see their old boss today. He wanted to hire them for a consult. All the pain, hurt, anger, and sense of betrayal of twenty months ago threatened to engulf him again. He rolled over and snuggled up against his lover's back. Bodie was taking this much better than he was — ironic, that.

If anyone had asked him two years ago who would be hurt most by Cowley's giving them the boot because of their homosexual relationship, he'd have said Bodie. But Bodie had weathered the storm much better than Doyle. They'd both been hurt and surprised by their boss's actions, and angry — because whatever Cowley claimed, he wasn't telling them the real reason for their dismissal. There was no way that he'd ever believe that George Cowley was homophobic or that he couldn't pull a few strings to allow them to stay — even if it was against traditional policy. The thing that had upset Ray the most was his feeling that after all their years serving CI5 they at least

deserved the truth. But Cowley was less than forthcoming — as usual — he just had to play his games....

Ray's mind drifted back to that day a little under two years ago when it had all changed.



He and Bodie had been together just under eight months and had decided that it was time that Cowley be informed of their **marriage**. The first few months they'd worked to maintain their stud image by double dating and arranging to be seen out with various birds by their fellow agents. No one noticed that they went home not with the women but with each other. The act paled after a while; they didn't want to be with anyone else on their off-duty time and had begun to resent the time spent in others' company. So, by the end of their fourth month as lovers, they gave up the pretense of dating.

The funny thing was that they'd never even discussed the decision, the last date had just occurred and then neither one made any more. It was weeks later that both men realized that there were no longer any women in the picture. They'd laughed a little at the discovery but had done nothing to change it. Instead, they'd retired early to bed and made love long into the night. Neither needed or wanted anyone else.

The job had been unusually hectic at the time, so it had taken another three months for anyone to begin to notice that the super-studs of CI5 were no longer involved with women. But the last month had seen too many comments and raised eyebrows from the other agents to ignore any longer. Cowley would have to be told; if he didn't already know, that was. The last couple of weeks both he and his partner had had the feeling that they were being watched and had even caught a glimpse of Stuart lurking outside one of their flats one day. They'd discussed cooling it for a while, but both had decided that they no longer wanted to live in

hiding. They wouldn't go out of their way to advertise their relationship, but they weren't going to go out of their way to hide it from anyone who chose to snoop either. And that included George bloody Cowley.

They went into a meeting called by their boss, well aware of the likely subject of discussion but unsure as to the stand he'd take. He generally preached tolerance and wasn't averse to breaking the rules when it suited him, so both men had felt that they stood a chance of keeping their jobs.

They'd been wrong.

Cowley, never one for the social niceties when something was on his mind, cut right to the heart of the situation.

"It's been brought to my notice that the two of you are spending an excessive amount of off-duty time together, even to the exclusion of your normal dating routine. While I encourage partners to depend on each other I think you've crossed the line and need to develop other interests. Do I make myself clear?" Cowley's gaze met each of theirs and then returned to the files on his desk with the assumption that the subject was over.

Bodie's confused look met his own, and Doyle realized that he'd have to be the one to confront their boss.

"I'm sorry, sir, but that won't be possible. We're committed to each other and intend to remain exclusive. There won't be any more women."

"Ach, man, neither of you know the meaning of the word commitment." Cowley's disbelief was evident.

Bodie stood up straight and looked the older man in the eye before replying, "We do now."

The CI5 Controller glared up at him — Bodie looked determined — and then turned to look hard at Doyle as well. He glared back, looking

stubborn; his eyes shifted under the old man's continued glare. "Even if it means that you no longer work for CI5?" Cowley questioned.

There had been no hesitation on either man's part.

"Yes," Doyle had quietly replied.

And Bodie's voice had echoed, "Yes, sir. Even then."

"You know government policy on this matter?" Cowley queried.

"Yes, sir. But we thought — ?" Bodie, always the blue-eyed favorite, spoke for the pair.

"What? That I had some sort of leeway no other operational head has? I'm sorry, Bodie, but I do not. If you persist in this relationship, I must ask for your resignations."

Both men nodded their understanding but their instincts were telling them that Cowley wasn't giving them the full truth — neither man believed for a moment that the Controller wouldn't change the rules when it suited him. Why it didn't suit him in this instance, neither man had a clue.

Cowley concluded, "Very well, gentlemen. You have one week to clear out of your flats and turn in your cars. I'll take your badges and guns now."

They exchanged a look with their boss and saw his determination, then a look with each other and nodded. Silently they handed in their guns and badges and turned towards the door.

As Ray reached to open it, Cowley's voice called out to them. Doyle and Bodie paused but did not turn around. "Bodie, Doyle, when you're ready to give up this relationship your places on the squad will be waiting. There will always be a place for you with CI5."

They nodded but said nothing. Both knew that that day would never come.



Yet, Ray thought, in a way it has. Just not how any of us would have predicted. And on our terms, not his. He found some satisfaction in that fact, but was still frustrated that they were no closer to knowing why he'd dismissed them as he had. They'd both expected him to try and talk to them, reason with them, hear them out, so that when he did none of that, they'd been thrown. *It's almost as if he didn't think we'd be gone very long.* Still, as Doyle mused over the last couple of years, he realized that Cowley had done nothing to make things more difficult; in point of fact when they needed his silence, he'd given it, and when they needed him to speak, he'd spoken. *What was the old bastard up to?* he asked himself for the millionth time, doubting that he'd ever get a satisfactory answer.

The first six months after their 'resignations' had been difficult.

Living on love. Ray had thought the idea was romantic dribble, until they'd actually done it a couple of times. They'd both got a bit saved up but had been determined not to dip too far into it — it was reserved to keep their new business going. They'd taken what odd jobs they could and had tried to set up a security firm. But while their CI5 credentials might mean something in certain circles, their departure under a silent cloud outweighed the value their training could offer. And those who didn't care about the cloud — well, those jobs were often too far on the wrong side of the law to be considered. So while they had managed to get a few security jobs, the income provided wasn't even enough to make expenses for the small office they'd rented.

Despite the difficulties of those first months Doyle remembered them fondly. Not working regularly had meant more time to spend together. They couldn't afford much of anything, but there were a lot of free things to do in London if you knew where to look; and if you were in love, those were

just as nice as the most expensive vacation. They explored the city and worked odd jobs when they got the chance, always together and always watching each other's backs.

He remembered one particularly rough day that had ended in a trip to the London Zoo



They'd been out of work about six weeks. Jobs had been scarce, there'd been a cold wave and the manual labor work had dried up temporarily, funds were running very low. He and Bodie were in the middle of their first real fight. There'd only been enough food left for a breakfast of two slices of toast and one egg. Ray had fixed it and served it to his partner, letting Bodie think that he'd already had his, instead having only tea for himself. Bodie needed to eat more than he did; Ray felt he could make do for a few hours. Unfortunately, Bodie discovered what his lover had done and hit the roof.

"Damn it, Doyle." Being called by his last name by his lover was always a bad sign — it'd been happening more and more the last couple of weeks as the money got scarce. "You need to eat as much as I do."

"Used to skip breakfast all the time when we worked —"

"That was by choice, not need, and you'd probably had a big dinner the night before, not just an order of fish and chips —"

"Still, I can do okay without —" Ray had started to insist.

Bodie interrupted angrily, "For how bloody long? We're out of money and food. Mother Hubbard had more in her cupboards. We're in this together and should have shared equally the last --"

"We've got a couple of construction prospects --"

"And it's cold as a bat's arse out there. Not going to be hiring any temporary laborers today."

"And what about that check we're due from our one and only client?"

"Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, or in a couple of bloody months. She has to wait on her divorce settlement and we have to wait on her." Bodie was determined. "That's it! I'm going to the bank to pull some money out of savings — "

"We agreed to use it only to keep the business going, not for living expenses — " Ray was just as determined.

"Well, we can't work if we're not eating — can we?"

"If we pound the pavement today we're bound to find some temp work. We agreed that the savings was not for — "

"Cut the crap, and let's cut to the chase."

Ray just glared back at his partner. "What chase?"

"That the reason you don't want to dip into the savings is that it's mostly my savings from before the squad and you don't want to feel like you're living off me." His partner opened his mouth to repudiate him, but Bodie beat him to it. "Don't try to deny it, Ray, you know it's the truth."

Doyle turned away, walked to the window, and stared out, not saying anything. What could he say, it was the truth, and they both knew it. He'd always been independent, and had been raised to believe that he'd be the one to support a family, now he was going to have to be the one supported. As much as he loved Bodie, he hated the thought of being kept by him.

He sensed his partner come up behind him; Bodie refrained from touching him. "Ray, do you want to go back to CI5?" Bodie's voice was soft and unemotional.

"That would mean not being together. Knowing the Cow, he's likely to send us to opposite ends of the country to keep us apart. Probably let one of us start a one-man branch in the Shetlands." Ray hurt at the thought that Bodie'd had enough and was ready to break up; he tried to hide that pain behind humor. It didn't work. When only silence answered him he finally asked, "Is that what you want? Us to break up so that we can go back to CI5?"

" 'S not what I asked you."

He turned in anger, ready to strike out at his lover who was so willing to give up the best thing they'd ever had. The look on Bodie's face stopped him cold. His lover had been able to keep the pain out of his voice, but not his expression. The blue eyes glistened with the effort not to cry. Ray took one step forward and drew Bodie into a fierce hug. He squeezed until he heard an 'Oomph' from his lover, then relaxed his hold and leaned back so that he could look into his face; raising his right hand to cup the side of Bodie's head, he allowed his thumb to gently brush away the tear that had overflowed onto a pale cheek.

" 'S going to be all right, sunshine. My pride's not worth giving us up. Just try to understand that it's hard for me to be kept." Doyle reached out with his words.

"I do know, love, but we can't starve." Bodie paused to steal a kiss from the sweet lips before him. "So here's what we're going to do: we're going to sign up with an answering service so that we can commit to longer-term jobs if necessary, I'm going to take enough money out for us to eat over the next couple of weeks, and then we're taking the day off from pounding the pavement and going to the zoo." Doyle opened his mouth to speak but before he could say anything Bodie covered it with his hand and said, "No arguments. We need the break."

"Wasn't going to argue, just going to ask if we were going to be visiting your relatives?" At Bodie's confused look — he had no close living

relatives — Doyle kidded, "Well, we are going to the ape house — aren't we?"

Bodie'd whacked him none too gently on the side of the head and they'd headed out.

Even now, so many months later, that day stood out among the rest as a special one, a turning point. It'd been the day he'd realized that nothing was more important to him than his lover, and that he had to learn to take as well as give.

The trip to the zoo had been an inspired idea on the part of his partner. They'd rediscovered laughter after too many weeks of strain.

At the ape house there was a keeper cleaning out one of the habitats; Bodie'd nudged him and pointed. "Looks like the Mather's twin — doesn't she?" Then he'd pointed to a dark-haired monkey looking through from another area. "And that's me wishing she'd just get out. And there you are over in that corner, feeling picked upon." He pointed to a small brown primate that was also watching the cleaning operation.

Ray had chuckled before replying, "Nah, mate, that's me mooning over the fact that I can't get at your sweet arse with her in the middle." Bodie'd looked quickly around to see if anyone had overheard. No one was in sight, so he'd pinched Ray's arse.

"I'll be getting it tonight then," his partner had leered at him, then winked. They'd both shared a dirty laugh.

He'd dragged his lover to the Ape House; Bodie'd drug him to the Children's Zoo. They'd had more fun there than just about anywhere else. The pigs had fascinated them both, city boys that they were. There was a sow in a sty with babies, thirteen little pink wigglers that squealed to high heaven. At one point, Mom had apparently had enough of nursing for the time being, and had left them to grab a bite to eat for herself. Said departure did not go over well with the little ones, and they'd yelled so loud

and long that both men hadn't been able to stop laughing for five minutes. For the rest of the day any reference to it would set them off again.

It had been especially bad near closing when a harassed mother with four little ones had tried to sit for a few minutes on a bench and drink a cuppa. Every one of the kids, from the baby in the pram to the seven-year-old, had continued to interrupt and complain about the break. They'd leaned against a railing and watched for awhile, and then Bodie'd leaned into his ear and whispered, "S all the same. Bet she's glad that she doesn't have thirteen little squealers."

That had started them both laughing again, and they chose to leave before someone decided that two hysterical men were up to something and needed talking to. Doyle didn't know what he'd do if some copper came up to them and asked, 'What's all this, then?', but he'd be willing to bet that he'd have to pick Bodie up off the ground, he'd be laughing so hard. The term 'squealer' had stuck with them, however, and it, or a mention of pigs or pork, was now their code for someone complaining too much about nothing.

After that day, surprisingly, rather than getting on each other's nerves — being together so much and in such strained circumstances — their bond had actually deepened. They'd finally taken time to actually talk about themselves. Up until then, each knew only the bits and pieces of the other's history that had slipped out during the course of their investigations or on late-night drunks. Over those six months, during long walks, many of them in the rain, they'd shared their pasts until no dark painful corners were left unrevealed. Ray'd found the process to be cleansing, and he knew that Bodie had as well. To be fully known and totally accepted as you were was a gift that neither man had before experienced. It was very liberating.

Six months out of CI5 they'd found themselves dipping more and more into savings just to last out the week, with few long-term job prospects, and happier than they could ever remember being. Had

either been asked if the price for being together was too high he'd have said, "No way. It was more than worth it."

The six-month mark did see one improvement in their circumstances. They'd pulled in every favor they had coming to get licences to own hand-guns; it was at this point that the approval had finally come through. With the danger from old enemies they'd put away and the need for arms to protect their charges when they could get bodyguarding jobs as justification, and several strings pulled by old friends, they'd managed to finally acquire the permission needed to carry concealed weapons. They were careful never to abuse their use and to keep their skills up to their usual superior standards, so that there could be no excuse to revoke the licenses. Those magic legal tickets had meant more jobs and more money coming in the han- to-mouth existence finally eased.

For a time they became hired muscle for many of the dignitaries that came to England on unofficial business. Most had their own bodyguards, but the presence of armed men from the host country meant a much better chance of surviving a kidnaping or assassination plot. They didn't like being hired stooges, and chose carefully whom they would work for — one Columbian 'official' was turned firmly down — but the jobs paid the bills and kept the office door open, giving them a chance to build up a decent business.

Their next bit of luck had come two months later. James Guthrie, whom they'd helped recover some stolen tank plans when they worked for CI5, recommended them to a friend of his whose multinational corporation was moving into England and needed a security system set up. It would be the break they needed if they could only get the contract. This wasn't just installing alarms but involved establishing security protocols and employee screenings to prevent industrial espionage from taking place. The job was up for bids because the last security chief had been fired for incompetence after the successful theft of some important research material, and everything was to

be done from the ground up. There were several firms bidding on the job, and only Guthrie's recommendation had allowed them to be included.

Ray thought back to the interview...



"Well, I trust Jim's opinion a lot, but this is a major security installation, and I need assurance that —"

Bodie spoke up — they wanted this job, it was the first real shot they'd had at what they truly wanted to do. "We both still retain our top-secret clearance. It's never been revoked."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Bodie. But what puzzles me is why you left CI5. It obviously wasn't for the money — you've turned down several very lucrative job offers in the past eight months because of who you'd be working for." He held up a hand as Bodie started to interrupt.

"Don't get me wrong. Of the ones I've heard about, I don't blame you at all for turning them down. Drug lords and gangland bosses are not the best of employers. However, if money was your prime motivating factor those jobs would have been accepted.

"And I don't think your departure was planned. My sources tell me that both yourself and Mr. Doyle were left scrambling for work, a place to live, and transport, and that CI5 was left trying to fill the gap that your resignations created. A gap, I might add, that my source says has yet to be adequately filled. The news reports are not always very informative, but CI5 has suffered several major setbacks in the months since you left."

Bodie and Ray exchanged looks. They knew the man was questioning their loyalty. Doyle replied, "It wasn't our idea to leave. Our boss thought it would be better for the organization."

Ronald Dale, head of R. D. International, studied

the men across from him carefully. They were perfect for what he wanted. All reports on them indicated that they were the best, better than he could hope to find anywhere else, and Jim recommended them very highly. Men who couldn't be bought, with ideals and principles, who loved their country, and who knew their business — yet why had they left CI5 and George Cowley?

His inside information said that up until eight months ago they had been the man's right and left hands, absolutely loyal, putting their lives at risk without question and without anger even when they were placed in dangerous situations without a full briefing. Yet one day they had walked in, given, or been asked for, their resignations — to the detriment of both themselves and CI5 — and left in silence. And to this day no one but the two men before him and George Cowley knew the reason. Without the answer to why they had left there was always a risk in employing them. He decided to confront the issue head on.

"I'd like to hire you but I'll be honest; I, like just about everyone else who looks at your firm, want to know why you left your former boss and job." He rubbed his temple in frustration; he needed them to open up and trust him. "I don't like to pry — it's your business — but you'll have to concede that the reasons for your departure could have direct bearing on the job I wish to hire you for."

Sighing, Doyle knew it was time to be honest. The answer couldn't cost them any more contracts than their silence had thus far. He didn't even have to look over at his partner to know that he felt the same way.

"Our boss asked for our resignations because we are in a monogamous homosexual relationship with each other." Doyle stood tall, shoulders back; he refused to apologize for something that had brought him so much happiness. He'd rather starve than give his partner up. *There, it was out, and didn't hurt near as much as I thought it would to say it*, he concluded.

Dale looked hard at them before questioning, "That doesn't sound like the George Cowley I've heard about. He's always preached tolerance." Doubt shaded his voice.

Bodie spoke before Doyle had a chance to. "Not the man we'd come to know either. But it's the truth. Our jobs are waiting if we're willing to give up each other." The man behind the desk still looked doubtful. "Call him up and ask him if you don't believe me."

Ron Dale nodded. "Very well, I'll do that. You'll have my answer tomorrow."

They'd left in trepidation. Even if they were believed, who'd want to hire a couple of nancy boys to design a whole new security protocol for a multinational corporation?

The answer was that Ronald Dale damn well would. He'd called them into a meeting the next day and informed them that he didn't give a damn who they slept with as long as they did the job. Cowley had confirmed their claim. In fact, the supposedly taciturn head of CI5 had been a bit on the chatty side. It wasn't until after he'd got off the phone that Dale realized that he'd been carefully interrogated as to the health and well being of William Bodie and Ray Doyle. Apparently their ex-boss was still concerned about them, and in reviewing the conversation Dale maintained the impression that that concern was more than just professional. He wondered what minister was so anti-homosexual that he'd forced the resignation of CI5's best team. 'Cutting off the nose to spite the face.'

Abruptly, overnight, they went from not making ends meet to being very well off. The primary job took over seven months — they were still paid retainers — and they'd gone from a business with just themselves as employees to one with twenty-four men and women working for them. R. D. International, Dale's company, had broken the blacklist, and within months they had more companies trying to hire them than they could

handle. Bodie and Doyle had decided not to try to expand too fast to meet the need but to pick and choose the contracts they would take. By the end of their first year in operation, their company was considered the best in the business for security jobs — at least in the UK — and it wasn't because of their history with CI5 that they were so in demand but because they got the job done better than anyone else.

Including, much to the government's chagrin, several of their own security organizations. It was becoming quite common for Bodie and Doyle to be hired to consult on matters of security even when the government was supposed to be providing it. MI5 had been particularly hostile on several occasions early on, but the new head of that organization was much more cooperative. The old head had been replaced when an operation he was in charge of had soured and it came out that he'd ignored Bodie and Doyle's recommended improvements. Ray smiled at that memory. No one dared ignore their advice again.

Twas kind of nice having them jump through hoops. Of course, several spectacular successes hadn't hurt either. They'd stopped one kidnaping attempt, some special back-up security devices they'd installed at one company had caught the perpetrators of a bit of industrial espionage, and they'd managed to recover some silver, stolen from a very wealthy peer, before it had gone to the black market or been melted down. Ray grimaced at the memory of that particular job. Marge Harper had been the one to help them out. Then he smiled as he remembered how that particular consult had ended.



They'd reclaimed the family's silver; it had just left in the insurance company's custody to be returned to the peer. All that was left was to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's, say thank you very much to Marge, and arrange for her check. Doyle'd been backed into the corner of her couch waiting for

Bodie, who was on the phone to the insurance company organizing payment of her finder's fee so that they could leave. Ms. Harper had always been fond of Ray Doyle, too fond as far as he was concerned, much to the previous amusement of his partner. Bodie had come into the room to see her hand slipping slowly up Doyle's thigh, a slightly panicked look on his mate's face. Young women, and all types of men, Ray could handle — no problem — but give him a motherly type with a crush on him and he was suddenly out of his depth. Up until this point, Bodie'd found both Marge's interest and Ray's befuddled discomfort quite amusing. Suddenly, now that they were a couple, Bodie discovered that he no longer found it funny.

"Tsk, ts, Marge. Hands off. Those bits are on reserve," Bodie had quietly stated, sitting on her other side, gently removing her hand and giving it a gallant kiss on the back before releasing it into her lap.

"And who's reserved them?" she'd asked indignantly. "I don't see no ring."

"An oversight, I assure you," Bodie had informed her. He'd then moved his look from her hand to Ray's eyes and dropped his professional guard just a bit as he said to Ray, "She's right, sunshine; we'll go ring-shopping when we're done here. Discourage any more misunderstandings." He grinned and winked at his startled friend and lover.

Doyle, who could very clearly remember the last time he blushed — he was sixteen and his Mum had just come in on him getting his end away with his current girl — felt his face getting suddenly hot and knew that he had to be turning bright red. Bodie, of course, was quick to confirm this.

"That's not a particularly attractive color for your face, luv. Red and green always makes me think of Christmas."

Ray looked over at Marge to see a distressed look on her face. "Ah, sweetheart, couldn't you have

done better than this lout?" She poked Bodie in the ribs with her elbow before concluding, "You're wasting yourself on him, you are."

Up until then Doyle had been befuddled and confused by Bodie's jealous revelation, but suddenly he understood his partner's need for someone to know what they meant to each other. And in spite of appearances, Marge could be very discreet. He stood up, turned, reached down with one hand, pulling Bodie up beside him and gave his lover a quick one-armed hug. "He suits me just fine, Marge, and I'm lucky to have him watching my back." He winked at her, emphasizing the double meaning of what he'd just said.

The woman studied the two men hard as she rose from the sofa, noting the flush and touch of embarrassment stealing up the taller man's cheeks. "You two aren't kidding — are you?" she sounded surprised to conclude. "Bloody hell!" Marge watched both men for a few more moments before she spoke again, addressing Bodie. "He's special," she nodded at Doyle. "You take good care of him."

As she turned and walked out the door Bodie's soft reply echoed in the room. "Always."

Marge sighed and left the room mumbling something under her breath about "damn if that old cliché wasn't true after all."



He fingered the ring on his left hand as he remembered the scene. Both he and Bodie now wore wedding rings, thanks to Marge.

Back to the business at hand, he mused, allowing his mind to return to their company. B and D Security Consultants was a thriving business with enough contracts to keep everyone working full out for years. And that was a problem. They didn't want to overwork their people — tired people got sloppy — and currently they still needed to hire at least half a dozen more to maintain their current

workload, but they'd kept their standards high and were having trouble filling the positions. The job was fun — they'd always liked setting up and testing security systems and operations — but the administrative side was a bitch.

They had several ex-Met men whom Doyle knew and could vouch for, also half a dozen ex-SAS — Bodie or his connections had vouched for them — and even a few CI5 and MI5 agents also worked for them, but finding more that they could trust was becoming difficult. They paid well so they often got the first crack at people looking for a change, but they demanded not only top notch skills but absolute reliability. Anyone they hired had to be vouched for by someone they knew and trusted. And those were getting harder to find. The best source would have been CI5, but they refused to do that to their old organization and boss.

They'd not gone recruiting among its ranks — in point of fact, they had at first turned down the CI5 agents who'd shown an interest in working for them. Bodie and Doyle did not want to antagonize their former boss by stealing from his already undermanned squad — but in the end it was the same story. They were married men who'd had enough of the risk and danger: one whose wife was pregnant with their second child and another whose wife refused to even consider having a child until her husband was in a less dangerous position and one agent's fiancée had said CI5 or him — the woman had chosen to stay engaged and go job hunting. So they'd given in. They needed the manpower, and these people would leave CI5 whether B and D Security hired them or not.

Doyle sighed. With the hiring of the CI5 agents they'd finally heard the truth about what was going on in their old organization. The news from inside was not good. He thought back to the night that they'd taken their three new hires out for celebratory drinks their first day on the job.

"S'how'd you like your first day, Kaye? Think it'll offer enough challenge?" Doyle had asked the woman as they sat down at a table at the back of

the bar. Bodie and the other new hire had gone to get the drinks.

"Oh, I think so, Mr. Doyle — "

"Told you to call me Ray," he remonstrated. As she started to protest he added, "At least when we're relaxing or in private. Mr. Doyle has me looking around for my dad."

She'd given him a cocky grin and nodded her agreement. "At least I won't have the same problem with Bodie. Can't see him telling me to call him William." Ray had choked, laughing so hard, at the very idea. Pam sat back in her seat with a smile.

Pamela Kaye was bright and efficient, she'd shared Betty's job for the last three years, first as her assistant and then on her own whenever the workload got too heavy — of late that had been all the time. She wasn't young — Doyle hadn't a clue as to her age; he'd guess early forties — she was pleasant looking and at first seemed quiet, and a bit shy; but he and the rest of the squad had learned quickly not to get up her nose, 'cause the sparks would fly. He grinned at the memory of the one time he'd actually heard her tell Cowley off.

Their boss had come down rather hard on Betty for not having something done that he'd requested hours before. Betty had left quickly to retrieve the file; the minute she was out of sight and earshot, Pamela had lit into him in her own subtle and inimitable way. "Next time you want someone who can do eight things at once, I suggest you hire an octopus."

The Controller had turned startled eyes towards her and she proceeded to list, in great detail and exacting terms, all that she and Betty had accomplished that day. Kaye then proceeded to point out that each and every item had been a crisis, according to their illustrious leader. God, what Ray would have given to see Cowley's expression when she'd called him that to his face, but hidden around a corner he didn't dare peek

'cause he wouldn't miss **hearing** this for anything. She'd then finished the old man off with "If you've got this many emergencies, I recommend you look at hiring another assistant."

Ouch, Doyle thought. *Right where it hurts him most — in the wallet*. Chuckling at the memory he studied the woman before him.

In only one day on the job, amazingly, Doyle had watched order spring from chaos at the mere touch of her fingers. Cowley was going to miss her sorely, but there had been no way to talk her into staying with CI5. The man who she'd been keeping company with for the last several years had finally come up to snuff and popped the question. Unfortunately, he'd made it clear that a job where bombs exploded in the boss's office and a hit man killed the security guard and went after that same said boss, was not a place he wanted his future wife working for. Her fiancé worked for the Home Secretary and so had full knowledge of the more notorious incidents in CI5's short history. The danger, coupled with the long hours involved with working for George Cowley, had led him to suggest a job change. Pamela, also wanting to spend time with her soon-to-be husband, acquiesced and sent out her resume. She'd been in high demand and Doyle and Bodie had been surprised and vastly pleased when she'd accepted their offer.

Shortly they were joined by Bodie and their other new recruit from CI5, Terry Wilfred. They chatted about the new jobs, the direction that Bodie and Doyle hoped to take their year-old company in, and how Pamela's wedding arrangements were going. Mercifully, for the sake of the men listening, she didn't go into any great detail. Ray then casually broached the subject that was uppermost in his and Bodie's minds.

"So, how are things going on the squad?"

Terry and Pam exchanged glances and opted for the truth. Terry replied, "Not very well. We've lost three agents in the last year since you've been

gone. Got some new up-and-comers, but no one up to the requirements of A-squad yet."

"Mr. Cowley is trying to restrict what CI5 takes on, but there's so much to do, and so many problem areas, that its resources are stretched to the limit almost constantly." Pam elaborated, "One of those agents we lost was shot in his own apartment as an act of revenge. He died on the way to the hospital. The shooter's dead too. Turns out she was just a pawn in a bigger game, and, of course, the men who used her got off scott-free."

"And that doesn't count several cases that have gone very sour." Wilfred did not look very happy at the memory. "When two of our operatives ended up shot by another Brit agency — well, that's when I figured the wife was right and it was time to change jobs to one with a longer life expectancy."

Doyle and Bodie hadn't pressed for details — neither man had wanted to hear more — but the gist of it was that Cowley was hurting without his best team to support him. Ray hadn't realized how much he had depended on them, and he hated to hear that things were going badly, but he also refused to feel guilty. *It was Cowley's choice, and whatever his reasoning, he is paying the price of that decision.*



Checking the time again, he stretched over and shut off the alarm before it could jar his lover awake. *There are much nicer ways to wake Bodie up.*

First Ray nibbled his ear, then down to his neck and shoulder; his partner was sleeping soundly — they'd not got to sleep until very late. Nerves over seeing Cowley again for the first time in almost two years had left both men too taut to find sleep easily. Doyle's gentle caresses merely caused Bodie to wiggle a little, nestling Ray's cock more firmly into his crack.

Ray smiled to himself. *If that's how you'd like to wake up, sunshine, it's fine by me.*

He reached over and grabbed the lube from the nightstand and, pulling slightly away from his partner, quickly greased himself up. Then he shifted their bodies slightly and inserted himself into Bodie in one long smooth stroke. *Damn, bloody marvelous*, Ray thought as he paused to enjoy the sensation. His lover apparently agreed with the sentiment because he spoke after a few minutes.

"Well, I'm not Sleeping Beauty and that's not a kiss, but I'd recommend it as a wake-up call any day." Bodie stretched and shifted a bit before continuing, "You going to spend the rest of the day like this or are you going to fuck me through the mattress?" He tightened his anal muscles, causing his partner to moan in pleasure. "Your choice, but if I get a vote, I'd cast it for a bit of action."

"Your desire is my heart," was Ray's somewhat muddled reply as he began to move deep within his lover's body.

"Ahhh ... that's perfect ... wish you could do that all day, mate." Bodie groaned as he met Ray stroke for stroke. Doyle's hand reached around and grasped his partner's cock knowing that his dark-haired, blue-eyed lover would not last long under the dual assault.

He didn't. Less than a minute later both men came with groans.

Bodie saw fit to complain. "Why'd you go and do that? Could have drawn it out just a bit longer."

"And made us late for our meeting with the Cow. No way," Ray replied.

"Suppose. Still, if he made any comments, I'd have loved to tell him just what we'd been doing."

"Know it still hurts, luv, but if we're going to do this consult job, we've got to remain professional."

And telling our client that we were late because I was screwing you does not project the right image."

"Pity. Still, it'd almost be worth it."

"Bodie!" Ray's voice held a bit of a threat.

"I'll behave." He shifted and rolled to look at his mate. At the skeptical look he saw on Doyle's face, he added, "Promise." Of course, the big grin and wink that he threw his lover when Ray nodded his acceptance did nothing to reassure the green-eyed man.



Second Movement: TRIO

They'd been in their meeting with George Cowley for almost two hours, and Ray Doyle was getting angrier by the minute. He finally lost it.

"No! No! And NO!! Absolutely not! We are not going to be your Judas goats again." Doyle paced across the small room and slammed his fist into a file cabinet. "You know damn well that the assassins are going to go for the bodyguards first and then the Sheik. It's the Parsali business all over again. We were lucky once; you can't pay us enough to take that risk again. We'll advise, run security screens, but you use your own people as bodyguards."

"I would if I could — "

"What's wrong," Doyle goaded, "no one stupid enough to play at being a martyr?"

"No. No one good enough. If I thought any of my people stood a chance, I'd put them in the line of fire — even if I knew it'd most likely mean their lives — but after Sinclair was killed and Wilde resigned, I don't have a pair that could stop the hit men. Anson and Murphy will be on sick leave for another four to six weeks at least, and there is no

one else."

"Well, then you'll just have to make do with what you have, because we don't hire out as targets any more. We're not expendable!"

At the underlying accusation, Cowley for once lost his cool. "You never were expendable! At least not to me. But you were the best, bar none, and no one could touch you. I don't have a team that comes anywhere close — "

"And whose fault is that?"

Doyle's question/accusation hung in the air. All the hurt and confusion that had been buried deep was suddenly brought to the fore. Before anything else could be said Doyle concluded, "We're not taking the job and that's it. We aren't going to risk dying for some Arab who's suddenly decided it's better to talk than fight and as a consequence is now under fire from his old associates." With those words he turned and stormed out the door, slamming it behind him.

Cowley was glad that this one was solid wood — a glass panel would be in pieces on the floor. He turned to the still-silent Bodie, expecting to hear his accusations and indictments before he stormed out as well.

Bodie surprised him. He looked up from studying the site plans and spoke. "It's a good plan, sir. I think we can carry it off — with a few of our own modifications, of course." He let a small grin appear. "It shouldn't be as risky as you think, if we're careful and if we make some changes. For example, you can bet that there is someone on the inside — absolutely above suspicion, naturally — who is feeding the assassins information. Our mistake with Parsali was to trust his judgement of his people."

Cowley listened in shock as Bodie continued with his plan. The Controller had come to think of Doyle as the planner of the pair and was suddenly forced to realize that there just might be a more

equal distribution in that area than he had previously suspected. *It's nice to see three-seven living up to his full potential for a change. I wonder if this is new or if they have always shared the responsibility?* He shoved the question to the back of his mind and concentrated on what Bodie was saying. He would consider the implications later.

"No one knows why you called Ray and me here, right?" At Alpha One's nod, he continued, "We'll keep it that way. You go on setting up everything as planned, and we will leave as if nothing had been resolved. Just a couple of ex-employees visiting to catch up. Then we'll set up an alternate site, and when the time comes for the meeting our people will take the Sheik and the PM there, and CI5's people will continue with the op just like you've set it up here. Once the major parties have been redirected, then you can monitor all communications and hopefully catch the traitor before he informs the assassins; thus they walk into a trap or fail to make their move. Either way we get the Sheik in and out of the country alive, and his people are responsible after that. If they kill him on his turf, that's not our lookout. And if we happen to help them catch a traitor, well, that will just put him in our debt — not a bad position to be in."

"That asks a lot of trust, Bodie." Both men were well aware that if Ray and Bodie decided to sell out and arrange the deaths of any of the major parties they could be set for life.

"You've trusted us before, sir. And we were making a hell of a lot less then. I think you know that you can trust us now. Besides, I'm not suggesting that they leave their own security behind, only that no one but us be informed of the real site for the meeting until they actually arrive there. And then no outside communication is to be allowed for the four to six hours you estimate that the meeting will take. If it runs longer than that there could be problems, so try and make it clear to the PM that quick resolutions could mean the difference between life and death, and of course

we'll have to make sure that no tracking devices are used on any of the party — or our own agents for that matter. It's not hard to bug someone without them knowing it, as you should well know." Cowley glared but didn't argue; Bodie had bugged and followed him on more than one occasion. He decided to address his major concern.

"Be that as it may, there is no us here right now."

"Doyle will come round."

Cowley very much doubted it but only said, "You talk to your partner and I'll think about what you propose. Shall we meet in ... say ... three hours at the Red Lion?"

They shook hands and Bodie left.

George Cowley brooded about what he would do now. It was a good plan and he might even try to execute it, even when B and D Security turned him down. And he had little doubt that turn him down they would. Doyle had always led the partnership, and when he'd left Cowley's office the Controller could tell his mind was made up and that nothing was about to change it. Bodie would follow as always.

He got up and decided to consult CI5's doctor about how much work Anson and Murphy could do. It was possible that while they couldn't work as bodyguards they could set up a safe house for the meeting to be switched to at the last minute as Bodie had suggested. No one was likely to be watching them while they were out on sick leave. Exiting his office, he debated between the lift and the stairs and decided that the way the lift had been running of late the stairs were the more reliable alternative.

Quietly opening the door while lost in thought, he started down the stairs. Before he had got very far Cowley was surprised to hear four-five's voice. He stopped to listen; apparently Bodie had just found his partner.

"You told him we'd take the job, didn't you?" The voice held no anger, no protest, only resignation.

"He needs us, sunshine." Bodie's voice was calm and assured.

"Know that, luv. But I need you, too. You know who's most likely to buy it if anything goes wrong, don't you?" Both men knew that Bodie, who'd be the closest bodyguard to the Sheik, would be in the direct line of fire, with Doyle a close second as the background guard.

"Well, I've got a few plans, plus I'm going to insist on those new vests from the States: lighter weight, yet stronger, not supposed to slow you down like the ones we've got, and even dum-dums can't do any damage if they can't get into your body. Could still get hurt but most likely not fatally.."

"And what about a head shot?" Doyle was not going to surrender easily.

"A professional hit man, with all the security we'll have on, and only one or two shots possible before being stopped. No way, mate. That kind of shot is just too likely to miss. He, or they, will go for the body."

Doyle nodded, surrendering. There had never been any doubt anyway. Bodie wanted it and whatever his partner **really** wanted he got.

"You just remember if you're wrong to wait for me on the other side. I won't be long in following."

Cowley risked a glance around the corner. Ray was seated on the landing, his back to the wall and his knees drawn up. As he watched, Bodie knelt down beside him and pulled him into his arms. Ray leaned against his mate and rested his head on the dark-haired man's shoulder; his arms came up to pull Bodie closer both men giving and receiving the needed comfort.

The embrace lasted no longer than half a minute, but it was enough. Doyle lightened the mood as he

pulled away. "So who's springing for the vests?"

"The Cow, of course." Bodie grinned at his partner. "And not just two vests but four. One for you, one for me, and one each for the Sheik and the PM."

Ray chuckled, "That's going to go over like a lead balloon with all parties concerned. And what about the old man's budget?"

"Bugger the budget. Cowley wants us; those are the terms of employment." The kneeling man grinned at his seated partner. "Sorta nice being able to dictate terms."

"And if he doesn't spring?"

"Then we don't play." Bodie stroked Ray's hair before continuing, "I want to help the Cow but not at the cost of either of our lives. If he's not willing to spend the money to give us the equipment we need then he's not the man I thought he was and we walk. I won't argue. Deal?"

"Deal," Ray conceded. "So when and where do we meet him again?" he asked as he stood, stretched, and reached a hand down to his partner.

Bodie allowed Ray to pull him up and began to discuss the upcoming assignment as they continued on down the staircase, oblivious to the fact that they left a very surprised man standing on the stairs above them whose only thought was, *How could I have read him so wrong?*



Third Movement: MARCH

The operation had gone like clockwork. The Sheik and Prime Minister had had a successful, uninterrupted meeting. The Sheik's stepdaughter had been caught trying to contact the terrorists with the change in location, and the assassins had walked into CI5's trap. Two dead terrorists, one

injured, and no major CI5 casualties, just a few nicks and scratches and one shoulder wound that would keep Stuart off duty for a couple of weeks. B and D Security had lived up to their reputation; Bodie and Doyle were justifiably proud. And any doubts that still remained about whether they could be trusted with high-security contracts had been removed by Cowley's hiring them for this job.

CI5's controller was torn between pride — he'd helped to train them — and sadness — he missed them and not just as agents but friends as well. In his job, people he could trust and rely on were few and far between. These two had come as close as anyone had in a long time. The sad part was that he doubted that they would feel the same. Yet had he ever really known them?

As George Cowley watched Ray Doyle walk away, he commented to the man beside him, "It seems I didn't know either of you as well as I thought I did."

"Sir?" Bodie was surprised by the statement. If he thought anyone knew him, besides his partner, it was CI5's head.

"I never reckoned you'd live up to your full potential as a tactician. You always preferred to let someone else take the lead — especially myself or Doyle." He turned and faced Bodie once Doyle was out of sight, a bit of accusation in his tone. "And you let us. Hid that skill, never volunteering ... Makes me wonder why."

They'd come a long way over the years and the last two and a half years with Ray had given Bodie the secure foundation he needed to be honest. "Never wanted the responsibility that kind of planning involved. Was willing to take care of myself and my partner, but didn't want a lot of other lives resting on my decisions — not if I could help it, anyway. I've got better at assuming responsibility over the last couple of years — has to do with support. Besides, Ray takes too much guilt onto himself — this way if I assume more of the

responsibility it's not so hard on him if things go wrong."

Cowley nodded, still a little shaken. Learning this about three-seven had made him wonder just what had really gone on with Bodie's 'breakdown' and that motorcycle gang. Well, the only one who could answer that was Bodie, and maybe Doyle, but he doubted either man was going to talk. It wasn't relevant now anyway; there was something else that had to be said and for once he hadn't a clue how his agents would react. *His agents?* Yes, he still thought of three-seven and four-five that way. *Maybe with the truth?* ...

"Doyle was always hard for me to read ..."

Bodie waited for his ex-boss to continue, but Cowley seemed reluctant to do so. There was something the older man wanted to say; Bodie strove to encourage him. "I still have trouble at times —"

He was interrupted before he could go on. "His emotions appear to be very accessible, he gives the impression that what you see is all there is — not at all like you. With you everything was buried deep, except how you felt about Doyle; that became apparent to me within the first six months of your pairing."

"Wish you'd told me. Took me a hell of a lot longer to figure it out than that."

"I didn't really think it mattered since four-five was never that involved."

"If you're going to try and tell me that Doyle doesn't give a damn —"

"I'd never try to tell you that although that's exactly what I believed almost two years ago when I demanded your resignations. Ach, man, I know enough not to try and convince two people in love that it'll never work. No, I figured you'd work it out for yourself within a few months. A year at most."

Bodie angrily interrupted Cowley. He did not like what the Controller was implying about his partner. "You don't know a damn thing about — "

Cowley held up his hand to stop the tirade. "That's become very apparent to me over the last month since I hired the two of you back on this consult. Actually, that first day back when I overheard your conversation in the stairwell, I realized how badly I'd misjudged Doyle's attachment to you. It seems your resignations were — unnecessary."

"We weren't going to give each other — "

"It was never the homosexual aspect that I objected to — "

"Then what the bloody hell was it?" For two years that question had preyed on his mind. Finally, Bodie realized, he might get an answer.

"I assumed that your relationship with Doyle would follow the same pattern all his other relationships had. I'd never seen any sign from him that his commitment to you was any more permanent than to Miss Holly or a myriad of other women who passed through his bedroom with alarming regularity. Your bedroom had quite the revolving door on it as well, if I remember correctly, but it was my belief that you'd give that up for Doyle. I could not say the same for him. And it was my opinion that you would not take the inevitable breakup well. In your job ... with the risks involved on a daily basis ..." Cowley's voice trailed off and he shrugged. "I was afraid of what would happen as the relationship soured."

"In other words, you thought I'd blow an op and get myself killed in the process — "

"I considered it a distinct possibility, and that four-five's guilt would have him following you right into the ground. Not to mention any bystanders when things went bad. It just seemed wisest to remove you and Doyle from life-or-death situations until the relationship ended. And since no CI5 assignment is without risks ..."

"You figured I'd come crawling back — "

"Not crawling — never that. I assumed that the relationship would not survive the stresses of being out of work, and after it had fallen apart one or both of you would take some time to get your heads together and then rejoin the squad, working separately, of course. But while I'd lose my best team, I'd still have one or both of my top two agents."

"Well, you might have been right about everything else, but you missed the target a mile when it came to Doyle."

"Yes. You appear to be inaccessible; Doyle actually is. It must have been very difficult to get behind his walls."

"Not really. Don't have a clue as to how and when. Just one day woke up and realized I was there but still ..." Bodie broke off. As close as he was to Cowley, what he and Ray shared was too private to discuss with anyone, even George.

The point of this discussion finally dawned on Bodie. "You want us back, don't you? That's what all this is about? You expect us to give up everything we've worked for over the last two years, to go back out and risk our lives on the streets again — "

Cowley interrupted, shaking his head. "No, not on the streets again. I heard Doyle that day on the stairs; he'd turn me down flat if I suggested something like that. He's not about to risk you on a daily basis like that, and if I can still read you at all, laddie, I'd say you feel the same way about him. But I do want you two back."

Explaining was difficult but the Controller was determined. "I'm in my late fifties. If I'm lucky, I can keep up this pace for another ten years, but that's trusting a lot to luck. I need backup I can rely on — who understands what CI5's all about and who don't give a damn about gaining political power — to help me run the organization both

now and in the future. I also need top men to help plan ops and security and to help direct the teams. The job's getting to be too big for one man to do alone. There's more need for our work now than there ever was before, and I just can't do it all. I think you and Doyle are the men I need to help me position the organization for the future. There is still some risk — I've been the target of more than one assassin — but it's not as dangerous as being out on the street, and the three of us can make a difference." The Controller of CI5 stopped there. He'd made his point. Bodie would take his message and reasons back to Doyle and they'd decide. The future of CI5 was again in the hands of his two most trusted agents.

"And what about the fact that we're involved?" Bodie still doubted that it wouldn't make a difference.

"Ach. As long as you're discreet, I don't give a damn, and I'll make sure the ministers don't either. I'm owed enough favors to guarantee that. You won't be the first pair of homosexuals in government and certainly not the last. I know about the relationship, so that means no blackmail potential. As long as you don't hit the gay bars nor go out dancing together — "

Bodie snorted at this last image. He didn't dance with birds; wasn't about to start with Doyle.

Cowley smiled. *No three-seven wasn't likely to take his partner dancing.* He continued, "In this day and age, with the Princess making no secret of her gay friends, and the current more open climate towards gays, no minister is likely to take up ousting them up as a cause if he can avoid it. Keep your noses clean, and it won't be a problem.

"And by the time I'm ready to retire in ten years or so — well, I hope the policy will be that sexual preference is irrelevant." Cowley clapped Bodie on the back and concluded, "Just give it a little time and think about my offer."

Bodie nodded his agreement; he'd think about it.

Still, there was one major problem, "I'll talk to Ray, but I'm not making any promises. He was a lot more hurt by your treatment than I was."

"I know. That was another surprise. Doyle's just so damn hard to read at times." The Controller shook his head; Ray Doyle was truly a puzzle box.

Bodie had to smile. Cowley was repeating himself. *Doyle must really have him shaken*, he decided. He could remember more than a few times he'd felt the same way. When Ray shut himself off like he sometimes did he could be a right pain. And getting an earful of Cowley's reasoning after nearly two years of silence was bound to set the little sod off. For once Bodie was glad that he was just going to be the messenger boy. Let the Cow and Doyle fight it out.



Bodie wine and dined Doyle that night. One of London's best restaurants, then a West End play that his partner had been dying to see, followed by dessert at a popular nightspot. Cowley'd pulled the strings to get them tickets to the play, which had been sold out for months — whether it was his way of apologizing or he was trying to get on Doyle's good side Bodie hadn't a clue — but he wasn't about to look a gift cow in the mouth. Then after the play he'd taken his partner for cherries jubilee at a nearby restaurant and finally a taxi home.

Doyle had enjoyed himself immensely and was, Bodie thought, relaxed, unsuspecting, and ripe for the picking. He should have known better.

They'd let themselves into their flat, and as Bodie set the locks and alarms, Ray went into the kitchen to make tea. Sitting at the table waiting for the water to boil, Ray proved that his partner still couldn't put one over on him.

"Okay, mate. Give."

Bodie, who'd been leaning with his back against the counter contemplating his feet and wondering how to bring up the subject — not to mention wondering what he himself wanted to do about all Cowley had told him — looked up, startled. "Give what?"

"Dinner, a play, cherries jubilee ... I don't get treated this well for me birthday." Doyle smiled at a sudden memory. For his first birthday that they'd spent as lovers, one of his presents had been the gift of Bodie's arse. It'd been at that moment that he'd finally accepted that this was it for all time. It was a very fond memory. "Don't get me wrong, nothing can top my pressie when we first got together, but you're up to something, so...?"

Bodie sighed. He never could fool his partner for long. He cut to the chase. "Cowley wants us back as deputy controllers."

"He what?" Doyle's surprise was punctuated by the whistle of the tea-kettle, which made both men jump. He stood to make the tea, but it was obvious that he was distracted by what his mate had told him. Bodie hoped he wouldn't burn himself.

"Damn!" Ray'd overfilled the pot and cursed as he jerked his fingers out of the way.

"Come on and sit down and let me finish that — " Bodie got up and took over from his distracted lover.

Ray leaned against the counter, staring hard at his partner. Anger at the nerve of the man started to surface. "Now let me get this straight. Two poofs aren't acceptable as agents, but they're just fine as deputy controllers? That doesn't — "

Interrupting before Doyle could get on a roll, Bodie explained, "Seems the homosexual aspect didn't bother him — "

"Well, what the fuck — "

"Figured you'd break my heart. Get me killed, then

yourself."

"Now why in hell — "

The tea done, Bodie put the cups on the table, then reached out and pulled his lover into his arms. "Seems that our George thought I was just another of your passing fancies."

As what Bodie was trying to tell him finally sank in, Ray shoved away and paced the small room, ranting at the world in general and about Cowley in particular. "Of all the stupid, idiotic, moronic, short-sighted, narrow-minded, penny-pinching...."

The words poured forth. Bodie was impressed. Ray had quite a vocabulary when you got up his nose far enough. Cowley was far enough up for brain surgery.

After a couple of minutes, Doyle ran out of steam. Bodie sipped his tea, watching his mate calmly, then spoke.

"You fooled everyone, luv. I didn't know till you told me, and I'm a lot closer to you than he is."

"That's not the issue." Doyle was still pacing.

"Well, what — "

"What'd he think? That I couldn't figure out for myself what would happen to you if this went sour — or me for that matter? Did he think my brains were in my balls? Why'd he think I waited six bloody years — "

"What the hell do you mean six years? Just when did you start fancying me?" Suspicion laced Bodie's voice.

"The day you walked into the training center and turned your nose up at the entire class." Ray grinned at his flabbergasted partner. He'd thought that Bodie knew this already. *Oh well, must have missed it during our heart-to-hearts.*

"You're putting me on." Bodie crossed his arms; he was skeptical.

"Nope." Ray just grinned some more.

"But you knocked me flat on my arse. Acted like you didn't want to be my partner. You couldn't stand me," Bodie said with conviction.

"That was no act, mate, I couldn't! Bloody hell! Never had a bent thought in my life, and suddenly this ego-on-legs walks in and I'm noticing what a nice body he has. And those blue eyes — never seen quite that colour before, could've got lost in them, even back then. 'S damn right I didn't want you as my partner." The smile on Ray's face got bigger as he remembered that day. "Got your attention and cooperation with that punch though — didn't I?"

"You sure did that." Bodie rubbed his jaw in fond memory. "Anyway, that's what the Cow was up to when he demanded our resignations."

"So **now** he's convinced that I'm not going to dump you."

"Yeah. Guess he figures that two and a half years is a good indication that this isn't one of our passing flings."

Doyle nodded. Finally things made sense. He was still pissed as hell at the old man, but at least he understood his reasoning better. And, bottom line, he had been protecting them. True, he'd been wrong, but it made more sense than the idea that Cowley was homophobic. Still, there was a major unanswered question in all of this. He looked at his partner; their eyes met and knew.

He asked it anyway. "So what do you want to do?"

"Ray, love, I haven't got a clue."



Doyle had mulled, brooded, and meditated on all that Bodie had revealed about their ex-boss's motives and machinations. Now that he knew the truth — as much as he was ever likely to — he wasn't surprised that the old man hadn't wanted to be the one to tell him. Cowley avoided his temper whenever possible, and a shouting match between the two of them over Bodie would have accomplished nothing but to drive the wedge deeper.

In the end it all came down to three questions: one — could he forgive the Cow, two — was he willing to live with the added risk that being a deputy controller would entail, and, finally and most importantly — which job did he and Bodie want more? The answer to the first two was probably yes, but the question of the job was harder to decide.

As heads of a well-respected and highly-in-demand security firm, he and Bodie could name their price, chose the jobs they wanted, and have a great deal of control over the handling of any operation. As deputy controllers they were back under George Cowley again, and there was no doubt in his mind that the biggest problem with that was that he knew for a fact that he couldn't trust the old man. If he thought it was for the good of their country, Alpha One would hang them out to dry again and again. Their six years in CI5 had proven that. There had been less than a handful of missions that qualified, and he'd watched their backs when he could, but still ... when it came down to it they were regarded as expendable. So going back would mean watching both his and Bodie's backs to make sure they were covered.

He was pretty sure that he could do that. Cowley had a conscience, and that boiled down to the reality that every time he'd set them up he'd telegraphed the fact. *So if we're careful and keep an eye out ... Still, do I want to sell out and take the CI5 job?*

They'd had a couple of lucrative offers for their business since rumors of their possible return to

CI5 had surfaced. Their firm with all its contracts was now quite valuable. If they invested the money wisely and didn't live too high on the hog, they could live on it for quite a long time — fifteen, maybe twenty years. And if the pay for deputy controllers was added into the equation, they should be set for life. Money wasn't likely to be a worry in the future, and Cowley had even said that they could do consults for their old firm provided there were no conflicts of interest. That could bring in a pretty penny, too.

So it was back to the job and the risks involved.

It hadn't mattered back in his twenties when that shield of invincibility seemed to surround him, but loving Bodie and being loved by him had made life all that more cherished, and he wasn't sure that he'd willingly see his blue-eyed lover ever in the role of target again.

So what's the appeal of CI5? Why even consider Cowley's offer? He argued with himself, but he knew the answer — they both did. They respected and admired the old man, believed in the work that the organization did, and thought that they could make a difference.

He sighed. It was time to talk to the Controller.



"I misjudged you. That's the mistake I made, but what would you suggest that I have done?" George Cowley wasn't apologetic nor defensive; he merely stated the facts.

"You could have tried talking to me privately about your fears. Given me a chance — " He saw the Controller's skeptical look and stopped, asking, "What?"

"I never doubted the existence of your feelings, only their durability. I doubt that there would have been anything you could have said at the time to convince me that Bodie wasn't going to be another — "

"There was a difference!"

"I know that now, but only time has convinced me of that fact." At Doyle's start of protest, Cowley hurried on, "Don't forget I've watched you through numerous relationships, and each time you'd appear to be deeply involved, but they never worked out, never lasted. There was no reason at the time to suppose that three-seven was going to be any different. While his level of commitment to you had been apparent since early in your partnership, your commitment to him never appeared to reach the same depth —"

Before he could go on with his evaluation, Doyle interrupted, "You're a fool, George." The Controller was stunned into silence by the man's use of his first name and his statement. Ray propped himself on the window ledge in the Controller's office and went on, "I suppose it never occurred to you that the reason none of my relationships with women worked out was because I was in love with Bodie."

"You showed no signs — "

"I should bloody well hope not!" Doyle's loud voice filled the room; he stood up, strode across the room, slammed his palm hard on the Controller's desk. "I'd had a couple of years doing undercover work with the drugs squad — learned to hide any feelings I had by the time I joined the mob — if I hadn't I'd have been dead many times over. And homosexual desires for another man were very high on my list of things to hide." A hard look met his former boss's scrutiny.

"Your psych tests — "

Ray calmed down a bit and perched a hip on the edge of Cowley's desk. "My psych tests showed that I was adaptable and somewhat liberal in my sexual behavior — they're good, but not that good. They can read stress but not the cause; they can spot desire, but you can fool them about the object

of that desire. I just misdirected the interviewer to some of my wilder exploits — "

"So, you'd had other homosexual desires and experiences?"

"Not a one. Shook me quite a bit when I walked into that first training class and fell flat on my arse in lust for one William Andrew Philip Bodie. Quite an awakening for a twenty-five-year-old heterosexual, I assure you." He paused to remember those first days, shaking his head at the memories, a small smile kissing his lips, then continued his explanation. "Figured it was just a passing thing; so I acted tough, stood up to the conceited sod, and screwed any female who'd let me on the weekends."

Doyle chuckled at the recollection. "Didn't help a damn bit. Fell in lust for his body and then his sense of humor made me fall in love." He pushed off his perch to pace, the memories making him tense as he continued his revelations. He wanted, needed, this man to understand. Without that understanding there could be mistakes in the future that could prove disastrous for all concerned. Cowley had to be aware that, for Ray, Bodie came first. The younger man didn't regret the last two years in the least, but the misunderstanding that had led to them couldn't be allowed to repeat itself. It'd been costly enough as it was. Doyle didn't want to think of the people that might still be alive if he and Bodie had remained with the squad.

"I don't know ... I've never been able to figure out the whys and wherefores" Ray fought his natural tendency to hide his emotions as he strove to explain. "I tried to tell myself that it was just time to settle down. Except that I'd been getting serious with a girl over the last few months before the training started and within two weeks of meeting Bodie I'd broken it off. Blamed it on the stresses of the new job and demands of the training program, but it was a bunch of shit, that. Was Bodie even then." A smile hovered on the younger man's face; the memories were pleasant.

"Figured I'd become a nutter and ought to have m'self committed. I mean not only to fall hard for a man — when I'd never been inclined that way before, mind you. But Bodie. I mean Bodie! Walking ego on legs, he was. Or at least that's what I thought until I got to know him."

Cowley sat silently, afraid that any comment he might make would stop Doyle's revelations. Never before had Ray given a glimpse of how his mind worked to the Controller. He doubted that the man had ever opened up to anyone this much — except to Bodie of course; from Bodie nothing was hidden. This last month of working with the men again had demonstrated that their two and a half years together had given both men the security and confidence to confront and deal with their emotions in a much more open and healthy manner than ever before.

Doyle continued his explanation. "Didn't know whether to thank God or curse the devil when you assigned him as my partner. In the end, I reckoned working that close should cure my adolescent infatuation. Instead, I finally got to see the real person." Ray leaned forward to drive his point home. "He was so scared he wasn't going to make it into CI5. Was the best at all the military and physical stuff, but the police procedures and working with people — was really hard for him, that. He didn't want to let me see it ... Hell, our first couple of weeks as partners, he covered with ego and bluster" Doyle met Cowley's gaze. "You know what he's like when he's feeling unsure."

The Controller nodded. When Bodie was feeling uncertain, he covered it with posturing and bravado. It made those who didn't know him well think that he was overconfident; when, in truth, it meant that he was at his most insecure. Cowley finally spoke. "He covers well, but, yes, I know what you mean."

Ray nodded, shooting his boss another grin. "I was getting fed up by then, I can tell you, but when that army man washed out ... Was almost as good as

Bodie, he was. Could tell that that shook my partner.

"He didn't say anything — doubt he could even admit it to himself — but the next time when I offered to help he didn't make any cutting remarks, or smart-arsed comments; he took all the help I could give him and worked with me. You know — one more sarky word from him and I'd have let him hang — but when he quit hiding and let me see his fear ... I was lost. Head over heels in lust and love and it's never changed."

Doyle fell silent, but Cowley waited; he could sense that there was just a wee bit more to come. The final bit of truth was revealed. "All those birds... I'd just get tired of getting nowhere with my straight partner and try and give up on him ... find someone else to love." Ray studied the floor and walls a bit, then turned and faced his boss again. "I'm not a masochist, you know. Mooning over someone I can never have isn't my style. So I pretended to myself and them that they meant something — all driven and intense, this had to be the one — yet when it came down to it," Ray shrugged, "no one ever came close to Bodie." He shook his head; a sadness seemed to hang over him. "Guess I hid it too well. You never saw it because my behavior towards him never changed; I'd felt that way for him from damn near day one."

"Ach, laddie, I still don't see how I missed it ..."

The younger man raised his eyebrows and smiled, asking, "You ever study magic, sir?"

Cowley looked puzzled, *What the hell does that have to do with anything?*

Seeing his boss's displeasure, Doyle shoved down a smile and went on to explain. "It's mostly a matter of misdirection. Making everyone watch your left hand, while it's the right that's picking the pocket."

The Controller nodded. *The spy game is a lot like that as well.* His irritation rose as Doyle seemed to

change the subject yet again.

"Can twist Bodie around my little finger — you know?"

Cowley nodded; that had been apparent from early on in the partnership. In fact, he'd found that aspect of their pairing very worrisome. Independent, bloody-minded, Bodie would almost never refuse anything Ray Doyle wanted. Even when he couldn't get three-seven to listen, Doyle could.

"Can read Bodie too. Understand him. Know when something's really important."

Another change of subject had Alpha One ready to read the riot act to the younger man. *Needs to learn to stick to a topic, not meander around hill and dale*, he groused to himself. He still wasn't willing to get up Doyle's nose; he hadn't said he'd come back to CI5 yet.

The Controller's temper finally flared. "Your point?"

"I always made sure that Bodie got what he wanted. Just made sure that no one noticed that was what I was up to." His ex-boss looked skeptical. Ray elaborated, "Remember that restaurant bombing that injured Bodie and almost killed his current bird and how mad he was?"

"No one was going to get in his way on that ..."

"I could have, you know. If I'd wanted to. We had it out, stared each other down, but I gave in and didn't fight him too hard on it. Then there was that time with the biker gang; let him get away with that, too, didn't I?"

"And what **that** did you let him — " Cowley was never one to pass up an opportunity to confirm his suspicions.

Doyle shook his head in denial. "Sorry, that's between Bodie and me. But I let him have his head

and supported him all I could — even though he wouldn't tell me what was going on.

"Was simple, really, to misdirect everyone. Just made my stands and won my battles with things that didn't really matter to him. When it counted, let him have his way."

"I'm surprised that I never caught on."

"Why should you? Wasn't you I was trying to hide it from so much as Bodie." Doyle had stopped his pacing and was perched back on the window ledge, his legs stretched out in front of him; he studied his trainers intently, "I knew early on, if he ever suspected how I felt, he'd either break the partnership or treat me like a doormat. Wasn't about to let either happen. Worked so hard at hiding it that I had everyone fooled — myself included, most of the time."

Ray chuckled, "Eventually I realized that he was starting to care and tried to let him know how I felt; dumb crud missed all the cues. Finally had to practically hit him over the head with it for him to figure it out."

A huge smile appeared on Doyle's face as he concluded, "We got there in the end, and that's what counts." The revelations were over, and Cowley doubted that he'd ever again be given an opportunity to look so deeply into the heart of the young man before him, but once was enough. Only death would separate the pair of them.

Doyle moved the subject on. "So, Bodie says you want us back as operational coordinators?"

Cowley nodded, accepting that the subject of his agents' relationship was now closed. "I need you two. You're good. Best I've seen, and I think that together we could really make some progress. These last two years have been more standing still, or losing ground, than making any headway at setting up a genuine criminal intelligence organization. Not to mention not making headway against several terrorist groups. Our funding has

increased significantly, yet I've not been able to make good use of the added funds: too many projects, too few agents, and no one else who has a clear grasp of the big picture. You two could do that."

"And risking us? Setting us up? Using us in dangerous situations because we're the best?" Doyle was still very leery of losing his mate.

"I can't promise never to do it — the pair of you are too damn good — but you can bet that it will be only in the most desperate of circumstances."

Looking just the slightest bit hostile, Doyle stared his boss down. "Then I guess we'd better reserve the right in our contracts to turn down any operation we're not comfortable with — "

"Don't be ridiculous, Doyle; I can't grant you something like that."

"You will if you want us back. Look, neither of us has talked about it, but you'd better just assume that if you lose one of us, you're going to lose both." He watched the Controller carefully to see if he was getting the message. He was.

Doyle drove home the point. "If we end up that good in the jobs that you've got planned, then losing both of us is not something that CI5 could afford. It's part of our judgement call." As Cowley started to interrupt, Doyle held up his hand. "And don't try to tell us that it'll never happen. It's happened one too many times for me to believe that."

"Besides, even if I trusted you, there are several ministers, heads of other organizations, the Home Secretary ... Well, you get the idea. They just might consider us expendable, but if we've got a right-of-refusal clause ... One, we've got a way out, two, it might discourage them from trying anything on, and, finally, if they do, you can point the clause out to them and tell them your hands are tied."

"And if I agree?"

"I never could refuse Bodie."

"If you're just doing it for three-seven's sake —"

"No. I want it, too. Maybe even more than him, but not if it means losing him. Or, for that matter, having to live with that fear eating away at me on a daily basis. So what's it to be?"

"I'll have the contracts drawn up for the pair of you to sign. How soon could you be ready?"

Doyle thought about it. "Well, we've got a very good offer — from a couple of good men, too. Ex-CI5 and ex-MI5, Smithers and Weston. One's too old, and the other's out on disability — neither man wants to retire or sit behind a desk and push paper. The security firm is a good compromise — not as risky or physically demanding as being a field agent, yet you're not stuck behind a desk all day. Bodie and I got to like it quite a bit, especially after Pamela came to work for us and took over the worst of the admin."

"They're good men," Cowley observed. "Not able to do the type of bodyguard work that the pair of you do, but they can either hire someone or concentrate on their corporate clients, and the occasional government contract, of course. And as for Ms. Kaye, you were very lucky to get her."

"Know that. You do know that we never hired someone that we thought would stay with CI5?"

"Aye, lad. The ones you hired would have left no matter what. CI5 isn't for everyone. I'll make good use of you and Bodie if you come back."

"Loaning us out to other agencies, you mean. Going to use us to accumulate some favors, I'd be willing to bet."

"Ah, laddie, you've got to make wise use of your resources." Doyle thought that the Cow looked incredibly smug at the prospect of other

government groups queuing up for Bodie and Doyle's services. Seeing four-five's look of mild disgust, he added, "Don't worry; CI5 plans to make full use of the pair of you. I'll be loaning you out only in very special circumstances."

George Cowley reached into his desk and pulled out a bottle and some glasses. Doyle grinned; this was the very best stuff. He watched as his future boss poured. Before he could put the bottle up, Ray said, "Better pour another one." At the old man's raised eyebrow, Ray glanced at his watch and elaborated, "Bodie's due in about three minutes — assuming of course that he —" A knock on the Controller's door stopped him in mid-sentence.

Cowley pulled out another glass and poured a generous measure before raising his voice and calling, "Come in and have a drink, man."

Bodie opened the door, glanced at Cowley, then at his mate, and a huge grin appeared. He shut the door, walked over, and grabbed his glass.

"So, when do we start, sunshine?"

The Controller answered before Ray had a chance to. "So, you two had already decided to take the jobs before my meeting with Doyle?"

"No, sir," Ray replied. Cowley looked puzzled. For all of Doyle's claims that his and Bodie's partnership was equal, he still seemed to be the one leading.

Realizing what was disturbing the older man, Bodie tried to give him some more insight into how he and Doyle worked together. "We both had our doubts, but I knew Ray would be the better negotiator, be able to explain things better. I could tell from his expression when I walked in that he'd got what we wanted, so he'd agreed for both of us. If he hadn't, I was here to join in the negotiations and keep tempers under control."

The smug look of superiority that Bodie shot his

boss got right up Cowley's nose. He held his tongue. It was quickly becoming apparent that the old double act had risen to even greater heights. *Ah, well, if nothing else, it'll keep me on my toes,* he mused to himself. *Better not let them think that they can get the upper hand.*

Before he could say anything, Doyle raised his glass. "Don't know about you two, but negotiating is thirsty work. How about a toast to the future?"

The three men raised their glasses in salute and then drank the liquor down, determined that together they'd make a difference.

C'est fini maintenant



MAZES

by Rudy

Iolaus made his way into the inn, smiling as he spotted Hercules at the bar with a mug of ale in his hands. The demigod seemed lost in thought; his pale blue eyes were clouded, and a hint of a smile curved his lips.

"Herc! Got one of those for me?"

"One of what?" he stammered.

"Hello? An ale? What else?" Iolaus frowned slightly; was Hercules **blushing**?

He shook his head and accepted the offer of Hercules' own mug, enjoying a hearty swig as he leaned against the bar next to his friend.

"What were you daydreaming about, anyway?" he asked, grinning up at the demigod.

"Daydreaming? Me?"

Hercules gestured for another ale. The innkeeper hurried over with a mug and a pitcher, refilling Iolaus' tankard for good measure. Nothing was too good for Hercules, who'd just saved the town from the ravaging Minotaur. Although he'd been too late to save the innkeeper's former partner. The innkeeper tried to look solemn, to disguise the joy which permeated his greedy soul. The highly profitable inn was all his now. He bustled away, mulling over his elaborate plans for the increased profits which would soon be lining his pockets.

Iolaus took a deep draught of the heady ale,

licking his lips appreciatively. He hooked a lock of damp hair behind one ear, and glanced up to find that Hercules was staring at him with a strange expression; distant, yet directly piercing.

"What?"

Hercules jumped a bit, and cleared his throat.

"Nothing. Well, it looks as though you're feeling a bit better. You certainly smell better."

Iolaus wrinkled his nose.

"Yeah, well, I wish you had joined me in the bath."

"What?" Hercules' eyes were wide.

"What, what? I said, I wish you had joined me in the bath. You reek!"

Hercules blushed again, and Iolaus stared at him in confusion as the demigod dropped his eyes and sniffed cautiously at his tunic.

What was up with Hercules? He'd been acting strangely ever since he'd rescued Iolaus from the Minotaur's cocoon. Iolaus shuddered, remembering that awful, suffocating feeling; he'd been half-conscious, half-lost in degrading dreams. The Minotaur's revolting breath against his neck, the thick stench in his nostrils. The vile eyes devouring him, the filthy, hooked claws reaching for...

He started as Hercules' hand grasped his shoulder.

"Iolaus. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You didn't look too fine. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Herc. I was just...thinking." Iolaus stared into the brown ale, silently begging Hercules to drop the subject.

"Thinking? About...?"

"Nothing."

Hercules caught and held Iolaus' shifting blue gaze with his own.

"Iolaus. Come on. Is it...the Minotaur?" His eyes were intense, burning blue.

"I really don't want to think about it, Herc."

You are anyway. You might as well share it with me. What did he do to...what happened?"

"Nothing, really. He just hit me so hard that I nearly passed out, then he put that stuff on me; it made me feel so...lost. So much...I don't know. Hatred. Ugliness. It was everywhere: in his hands, in the way he looked at me..." Iolaus looked away, and grabbed his ale. "He didn't do much of anything. Okay?"

When he looked back, he saw that Hercules' hands were clenched: his knuckles stood out whitely, and his jaw was clamped shut. His furious blue gaze was fixed on nothingness. His quickened breath was clearly audible. He remained silent, though, and Iolaus was grateful for that silence, he finished his ale, then got another. Nothing. Nothing had happened — nothing.

Iolaus' hair had dried in flying, buttery wisps around his face by the time Hercules broke the silence, pushing his well-used mug away.

"Come on, Iolaus. I've got to talk to you."



Hercules led the way to the dingy little room that he had rented the previous night. The soapy scent of Iolaus' skin drifted around him, overriding the lingering traces of the Minotaur's stench, which still clung to the demigod like a dusting of decay. He had to force his hands to unclench in order to open the door, standing aside to let Iolaus enter.

The Minotaur. Iolaus.

That foul beast had stolen Iolaus from his very side, while Hercules grasped impotently at his rapidly descending body. The Minotaur had held Iolaus in his power, coating him with his hideous essence. The stuff had been everywhere, clinging to each curve, smeared into each orifice, snarled in the sunny hair, filming the blue eyes. His malformed brother had preened himself before Hercules' disbelieving gaze, pulling Iolaus halfway out of that putrid cocoon, drawing his reeking claw along the flawless lines of Iolaus' strong throat. His twisted hand had slipped down the hunter's chest, to rake along his abdomen. Horror and revulsion had screamed through Hercules' soul as he realized Iolaus' codpiece had been opened, left dangling free. His belts were gone, his pants loosened so that they were nearly falling off, allowing an intimate view of his clear-cut hipbones, and of the soft, golden thatch of hair which lay between them, thick with the Minotaur's slimy green fluid.

The cruel claw had slipped onto that befouled nest of hair, as red rage rose up behind Hercules' eyes. The Minotaur pushed his hand under the concealing leather of the smeared pants, and Iolaus shrank away, even in his swoon. The invading hand slid its way around one fine hip, carressing the hunter's buttocks. Hercules had roared and surged to his feet, his brother turning triumphantly to meet his charge.

"Herc?"

Iolaus' gentle voice recalled Hercules to the present with a jolt. His eyes cleared to find the blond warrior standing before him, concern

radiating from his beautiful face, swimming in his wide blue eyes. Hercules slammed the door behind them and turned back to his startled friend in the same movement, filling his fists with damp grey vest and pulling his golden treasure into a passionate kiss. He dimly recognized Iolaus' struggles against his lips, his body, but he paid them no heed. His entire being was focused on the taste of Iolaus' mouth, the movement of the small, muscular body against him, the driving need to make Iolaus his own.

He pushed Iolaus against the wall by the door, devouring his tender mouth with the wanton savagery of an appetite which had been denied for too many years. He savored the sensation of the satin chest against his own, as Iolaus struggled to free himself from the demigod's impossibly strong embrace. He moaned and trapping Iolaus between his body and the wall, he freed his hands to explore the delicious terrain of that well-known form. Ah, the soft, wild hair, the velvet-corded shoulders and throat. He slipped the vest off and slid his hands down the strong, supple back, pushing his tongue further into the sweet depths of Iolaus' mouth.

He moaned as Iolaus gradually began to respond to the kiss, small, wondering sounds coming from him as he tilted his head carefully, adjusting to Hercules' questing tongue. His hands, which had been pushing frantically against the demigod's chest, stilled, then wandered up and around his neck, pulling him closer, threading through the heavy mass of straight, honeyed hair. He began murmuring something into Hercules' mouth as he was lifted and carried to the low pallet against the wall, as Hercules' body followed him down, covering him, imprisoning him beneath flesh and bone. Hercules tried vaguely to capture the words.

"Yes. Make it go away. Make it go away," Iolaus' light tenor voice trembled slightly.

Hercules pulled away fractionally, studying the intent face below him with feverish eyes, taking in each lean line, each gentle curve, marking them with his attentions. Iolaus' eyes were heavy-lidded and smoldering, his lips softly parted, as his disbelief gave way to bemused acceptance.

"Here?"

No time for explanations. Hercules dipped his head to drink again of the sweet wine of Iolaus' mouth, his already aching penis jumping as Iolaus raised his head to accommodate the kiss, gasping softly. No time. No time to waste. His hands sought and found the fastenings of his own pants and fumbled them open, then unbuckled Iolaus's belts.

Iolaus recoiled from this new intimacy.

"No, Hercules, no, please. Hercules."

No time to waste. This was his: this voice, this hair, this body, this soul. He wrestled with the stubborn leather of Iolaus' codpiece, growling with frustration as it resisted his efforts. Finally, it gave and he pushed it aside. Time to claim his own. He moaned and surrounded Iolaus' protests with a kiss, almost releasing his seed as his burning erection brushed against Iolaus' equally turgid shaft. He flipped Iolaus onto his stomach precipitately as the hunter renewed his struggles.

"No. Hercules, wait!"

Hercules pulled the leather pants, still wet from their recent washing, below Iolaus' knees, trapping his legs, and pushed his own pants past his hips as he lowered himself between the lean thighs. He pushed into the tiny opening hidden between the smooth, muscular globes of Iolaus' ass, burying his erection nearly to the hilt with the first powerful stroke. Iolaus jerked beneath him, crying out.

He savored the heat, the incredible tightness surrounding him, gripping him, as he pulled out and drove back in. Iolaus was trying to pull away, to disappear into the pallet. Hercules grunted with frustration and wrapped his hands around the slim, taut hips, raising them, pushing further into the long-desired haven of Iolaus' body. His haven. His love.

He began thrusting furiously, still restraining Iolaus' hips, staring hotly at the smooth movements of the artistically muscular back beneath him, at the golden hair flying as each

drive of Hercules' cock slammed Iolaus toward the wall, the clenching of Iolaus' shoulders as he braced himself against the onslaught. Iolaus' cries were growing louder, one forced from him with each stroke, mixed with an occasional gasp of Hercules' name. Hercules felt the impossible heat gathering within him, his every sense alight with wonder — Iolaus surrounding him, surrendering to him, beneath and around him. He shifted his grip, locking his hands around his prize's strong shoulders and pulling him toward each thrust, lowering his head to nuzzle under the sweet, silky hair and sink his teeth into the warm nape of the hunter's neck. Faster and further he plunged, until his seed burst from him in a blinding stream, exploding into Iolaus' fevered depths. A few more shattering, spasmodic thrusts and he dropped onto that beautiful back, gasping, his relaxed weight forcing Iolaus into the pallet.

After a timeless expanse, his head spinning, lost in the still-overwhelming feeling of Iolaus' tight body around his softening member, he regretfully pulled away. Iolaus cried out once again as he disengaged, then lay quietly, his shoulders shaking with his labored breathing. Hercules curled on his side and gazed drowsily at his lover's (*my lover*, he repeated to himself, savoring the thought, *my lover*) lithe back and tousled hair, his scrotum tightening with renewed lust as he saw a trickle of pearly liquid running from the cleft of the perfect buttocks. He placed a trembling hand on Iolaus' back, and the hunter made a small sound and pulled away.

Hercules frowned in confusion. He hadn't touched Iolaus, and he was probably aching with the need for release. He reached forward again. Iolaus arched away from his hand, sitting up painfully and turning to meet Hercules' eyes.

The demigod's breath caught as a dizzying paroxysm of pain and fear swept through him. Iolaus' face was wet with tears, his eyes wide and wary. *Dear gods, there's blood on his swollen lower lip: he must have bitten it through.* As Hercules watched, paralyzed, Iolaus lifted a hand to the nape of his neck and brought it away, bright with stained blood. Hercules suddenly became aware of the sharp tang in his mouth. His stomach turned as he remembered the sleek,

hot flesh of Iolaus' neck under his lips.

"Iolaus..." Hercules bit back a cry of distress as Iolaus backed away from his extended hand, his already huge eyes growing larger, darkening. The mortal slipped clumsily from the bed, pulling up his pants with palsied hands. Hercules cried out this time as the fine, ivory flesh was hidden from his eyes by the damp leather pants, and at the brief, cutting sight of the flaccid member which had been so hot and full against him before...before he'd...

He rose, pulling his own pants up to hang loosely at his hips, and reaching out to Iolaus. The blond darted around him to grab his discarded belts — then turned his trembling fingers to the task of fastening his codpiece.

"Iolaus, please..."

His golden companion met his gaze once again, briefly, the shock and wounded innocence shining in those blue depths striking Hercules like a physical blow. Iolaus managed to secure his codpiece and began fumbling with his belt, wrapping it haphazardly around his waist. He backed away as Hercules advanced upon him once again, tossing his sword belt over his shoulder and snatching his vest up from the floor before throwing the door open to dash from the room in a flurry of disarranged blond hair and flying grey vest.

Hercules fastened his pants quickly and followed, thundering down the wooden staircase into the common room of the inn. A few jeering laughs sounded, and he looked around, dazed, to find himself confronted by the mocking face of a man with rough, dark hair and the bearing of a warrior.

"You'd better learn to go easy on that sweet little piece of flesh you've got there, or he'll run off with someone who will. I'd know better than to ride such a tender thing rough."

His voice thickened a bit as Hercules met his challenging gaze with blazing contempt, but he held his ground.

"He's mine." Hercules threw the words over his shoulder as he pushed the man out of his way and strode from the inn, searching for Iolaus.



Iolaus felt as though he were fleeing through the landscape of a nightmare — strange faces staring at him with knowing eyes, coarse comments flung at his back. He flinched as he envisioned the picture he must present: half-naked, his lips swollen and bloody, his eyes full of the knowledge of what had just happened to him.

He stumbled and fell against a street vendor, who grabbed his arms, trying to catch his balance. Iolaus leapt backward, staring wildly into the man's confused face, then, pushed past him and continued his flight. He didn't slow his frenzied pace until he'd left the outskirts of the town far behind; then he abandoned the road, heading for the small lake which he and...

Hercules.

His knees nearly buckled beneath him, but he willed himself to continue, pushing through the trees to the lake's edge. He dropped his vest and sword belt, then pulled his clothes off, cursing as his hands fumbled over the task. Finally he was free of the leather, leaving it in a huddle on the bank as he sank into the lake, scrubbing his body mercilessly. The water stung as it touched the raw skin lining his anus, a pale shadow of the pain which stabbed through him as he remembered Hercules...

Hercules.

He submerged himself in the water, swimming furiously until his limbs were too leaden to obey his commands. Only then did he drag himself from the lake's embrace to collapse, gasping, on the bank. He lay still, too exhausted to keep his mind in check. His thoughts strayed to —

Hercules. Holding him. Kissing him.

A short, self-mocking laugh tore through him. For a moment, he'd actually thought that Hercules

desired him. Loved him; not as a friend, but as a lover. For a blinding, life-shattering moment, he'd felt Hercules' mouth on his, Hercules' hands on his body. As though he'd turned a corner into a sunrise, he'd realized just how much he wanted that mouth, those hands. What a fool he'd been. What a blind, conceited fool.

Why would Hercules ever take the...filthy leavings of a monster as a lover? Hercules could have anyone he chose, just for the asking.

But why had Hercules...why had he done...what he had done?

Iolaus shuddered, wrapping his arms around his naked chest tightly and squeezing his eyes shut. As though such feeble gestures could ease the pain.

Hercules had just thrown him down and taken him, used him, as though he were nothing more than a handy collection of orifices. His best friend, whose beautiful face had gazed at him with such sweet intensity. Whose hands had touched his face, his hair, had run down his body like twin flames. Those hands, those eyes, that face. The body that had promised so much, so unexpectedly. Until the demigod had brutally pounded his way into Iolaus, savaging flesh already screaming from an earlier violation. From the Minotaur's merciless, ravaging...

He sat upright, hugging his knees against his chest, making himself as small and compact as possible. The tears came, and he let them rock him — let them tear through him. What did it matter, anyway?



Hercules spotted Iolaus' golden hair easily as his friend fled through the town, leaving a trail of gaping townsfolk in his wake. He kept a considerable distance between them, the image of Iolaus' haunted face in the forefront of his mind. He replayed what had happened as they traveled and cringed inwardly at what he saw. He saw Iolaus struggling against him, heard Iolaus' shaking voice asking him to stop, to wait. He

had pleased himself to satiation in his dearest friend's unwilling body, then had lain in a drowsy stupor, watching the sculpted shoulders shaking, while planning his next assault on that precious golden citadel. How could he ever hope for Iolaus' forgiveness, when he knew that he'd never be able to forgive himself?

He'd let the distance between himself and Iolaus grow when they left the outskirts of town, and almost missed the signs of Iolaus' detour. Before he traveled two steps, he knew where Iolaus was heading; the huge, secluded lake where they'd stopped for a rest before tackling the last, short leg of the trip to town. He allowed himself to wish, for a moment, that he could go back to that time, knowing what he knew now. He pushed the idle fancies aside, and found shelter behind a clump of bushes as Iolaus stopped by the lake and tore free of his clothing, then slipped gracefully into the water, a beautiful assortment of ivory limbs and tousled hair.

His heart twisted as he realized what Iolaus was doing. He was scrubbing at his skin with concentrated fury. Hercules could see the smooth flesh reddening even from a distance. He washed ruthlessly, running his hand between his buttocks, splashing the water over his bloody neck and face, scrubbing at his back, his chest, his privates. Then starting over again. Hercules was on the verge of swimming over to him and grabbing those hands to stop their feverish movements, when Iolaus shuddered and stilled. Hercules removed his clothing, wading quietly into the lake with his tunic and undershirt in hand. Hiding himself behind an overhanging branch, he soaked the clothing in the water, then used the sodden cloth to bathe, cleaning the stench of the Minotaur from the clothing and his skin at the same time. He ducked his head and rinsed his thick hair. All the while he could still hear Iolaus swimming, tirelessly it seemed, the splashing completely concealing the small sounds of Hercules' furtive bath.

He knew why Iolaus had washed himself so mercilessly. He was cleansing himself of Hercules' touch. As he had cleansed himself, only a few hours before, of the touch of the Minotaur.



Hercules slipped out of the lake and sheltered behind the bushes again, pulling his pants on and wringing out his shirts, laying them on the bushes to dry. A change in the sounds of swimming alerted him in time to see Iolaus collapsing on the bank, his chest heaving with his overtaxed breathing. After a few moments, he wrapped his arms around his torso, obviously lost in painful reflection. Despite himself, Hercules allowed his eyes to caress Iolaus' muscular frame, beaded now with crystals of water. Dark bruises were beginning to show on his slim hips, and Hercules flinched, knowing that they'd been made by his own hands as he pulled Iolaus toward his thrusts. Still, the memory of being buried in Iolaus burned through him, and he fought to overcome the arousal that engulfed him at the thought.

Then Iolaus sat up, curling around himself and dissolving in racking sobs which were clearly audible from Hercules' vantage. The demigod was on his feet, and then at Iolaus' side before he was even aware of moving.

Iolaus' streaming, startled eyes snapped up to meet Hercules', and he pulled his discarded clothing closer, attempting to cover his nakedness.

"Iolaus." Hercules knelt carefully beside him, silently willing Iolaus to stay.

Iolaus got to his feet warily, stepping away and forcing damp leather over wet skin. He got the pants fastened in record time, and added his vest and boots for good measure. Then, as though the effort had drained the last of his strength, he slumped back to the ground, sitting cross-legged with his forearms resting across his thighs, staring at the bank beneath him.

"Iolaus. Please, let me help you. What can I do?"

"You can tell me why. Why did you do it, Hercules? Is it because of what...because the Minotaur...is that how you think of me, now? As something defiled, despoiled?" Iolaus' soft voice

was calm.

"Gods. Iolaus, no. I wanted you. I wanted you so much; wanted to make you my own. I couldn't see or hear anything else; I just knew that I had to be inside of you. We had to be together."

"We weren't together, Hercules. I've never been as alone as I was at that moment, not even when..." Iolaus' voice trailed off, then he raised his head to level defiant blue eyes at Hercules. "Not even when the Minotaur raped me." Hercules made a choked sound of distress at the dreaded confirmation, but Iolaus continued without pausing, "Then, I had the hope that you would appear at any moment, to end the nightmare. But — what was I to hope for when it was you?"

Hercules closed his eyes and reached for strength, then opened them again.

"Iolaus, I love you. I think that I always have. I know that I've wanted you for longer than I can remember. When I saw him touch you, I felt something give. I just knew that no one should ever touch you, except for me. No one should ever know the sweetness of your body, except for me. I lost control. I am so sorry."

He watched as Iolaus stood and walked away. He didn't rise to follow; he turned his weary gaze to the lake, and listened as the faint sounds of Iolaus' passage faded.



Iolaus began gathering wood mechanically, his formerly chaotic thoughts strangely still. He drifted gratefully in that stillness, allowing it to penetrate his battered bones and aching heart.

When he had gathered as much as he could carry, he returned to the lake, building a fire in the middle of a sheltered, level spot just up the bank from where Hercules still sat.

Hercules turned, cautiously watching as Iolaus performed the familiar task. How many times had he seen Iolaus doing this, how often had he

warmed himself at the resulting flames? There was a soothing quality to this gentle, homely dance, and he found himself rising, backtracking to his damp shirts and bringing them up to lay them by the fire, feeling a swell of gratitude in his heart as Iolaus made no remark upon his approach.

Following their usual custom, Hercules then turned his attention to fetching an armload of broad, soft leaves from the surrounding woods, laying them out near the fire in a makeshift carpet. His heart throbbed once again as Iolaus settled on them almost immediately, gazing pensively into the flames. Hercules pulled on his clammy tunic, allowing it to hang loosely, and sat, not so near as to alarm Iolaus; much too far away to suit himself. Silence still lay between them, and the weight of new knowledge. Knowledge of one another's bodies, of breaking points discovered and passed. Hercules found himself physically shifting in an effort to balance this unfamiliar burden. He started when Iolaus spoke, his light voice a sweet glimmer on the darkening air.

"I didn't know that I wanted you, until today. But — I do. Did. I don't really know what I want, now."

Hercules searched the fire-washed beauty of Iolaus' face, his regret a band of steel around him. What a gift it would be, to be allowed to touch those features, to pull Iolaus close and bury his face in his warm neck. To have those blue eyes blaze into his own, alight with need, to watch as he slumbered in a satiated haze. So much to have thrown away simply because he was too preoccupied by his own lust to take Iolaus' needs into consideration. Iolaus always seemed to know what was in Hercules' heart; he had behaved as though this, too, would be quickly understood and accepted by his peerless friend. That he would somehow know that this beast rutting above him was lost in the glory of touching him, tasting him, entering him. That each thrust penetrated Hercules' heart as deeply as it did Iolaus' body.

Iolaus watched as Hercules' face shifted through a series of emotions: sorrow, need, desire, regret.

He wanted to say something, to reach out, but fear held him back.

"Iolaus. Whatever it takes, whatever I've got, it's yours. I can't lose you. Anything you ask."

Iolaus laughed shakily.

"You know, Herc, I can't even think anymore. I'm just sort of...numb." He sighed heavily and lay back, crossing his arms across his chest and staring up at the dusk-crowned trees.

Hercules followed suit, and even dozed a bit, physical and emotional exhaustion overwhelming him. He awoke to a soft touch on his shoulder, and looked up to find Iolaus lying next to him, propped up on one elbow.

"Hercules. You said 'anything', right?" Iolaus continued at Hercules' nod. "I want you to touch me. If you don't do it now, I don't know if I'll ever be able to bear your touch again."

Hercules sat up slowly, with exaggerated care. He felt as though a breath could shatter the moment, felt in his very bones the fragility of the situation. With his heart in his eyes, he pushed an errant strand of gold away from Iolaus' intent face, then feathered a trembling fingertip across the torn lower lip. Iolaus' eyes closed, then opened again, clearly exposing his fear warring with his need to trust Hercules. As if it came from outside himself, a sudden realization presented itself to the demigod's mind. A memory of Iolaus, warmly willing against him, his mouth opened under Hercules', speaking into the kiss: "Yes, make it go away;" asking for a loving touch to ease his pain.

"Iolaus."

Hercules gently pulled the blond warrior into his arms, a sob rising in his chest as he mirrored his earlier daydream by nuzzling his face into Iolaus' neck. He tested the warm skin with his lips, softly. Iolaus taught him a new way to kiss, by arching his throat under that gentle touch, silently asking for more of the same. Hercules obliged, making his way up along the jawline to cover the deep dimple in one cheek with the lightest touch

of a caressing lip. He moaned as Iolaus pressed closer and wrapped his arms around Hercules' waist, meeting the demigod's dazed eyes.

"Kiss me." His voice was slightly rough.

"Your lip." Hercules hesitated, fearful of hurting Iolaus again.

Iolaus answered by touching his mouth to Hercules'. Their lips clung lightly in a kiss that felt like something more. A promise. Iolaus' hands stole up Hercules' back, one reaching to curve around the nape of Hercules' neck, a sensitive forefinger teasing at the small hairs there, causing a tightening in Hercules' groin. He clenched his hands against Iolaus' back, fighting the mad impulse to tear once again into the melting sweetness of his body. Iolaus tensed in answer to the fists against his vest, and Hercules drew a deep breath, looking into Iolaus' eyes.

"I won't. I won't do anything you don't ask me to do."

"Then, listen." Iolaus kissed him again.

"Listen to what?" Hercules asked, when his mouth was free of the tender torment of that simple kiss.

"Listen."

Iolaus lay still against him, and Hercules slowly relaxed, his hands opening and flattening against the fabric of Iolaus' vest, pulling Iolaus with him to lie back on the leaves, bathed in the crackling warmth of the fire. Gradually their bodies twined and settled together, the silk of Iolaus' hair against Hercules' cheek. There was the fire, the quiet sense of the lake beyond, and the soft rustling of the trees. The fire in Hercules' blood spread into a honeyed warmth, a lassitude. It gentled, without cooling, grew without consuming him. In time, Iolaus grew heavy against him, one strong leg crooked against Hercules' thigh, his head tilting forward until his nose was almost buried in Hercules' throat.

The realization that Iolaus had fallen asleep wrapped in his embrace overcame Hercules with

an overwhelming rush of gratitude, and an equally overwhelming sense of unworthiness. Reckless and brave as always, Iolaus had placed his body and his trust in the demigod's hands, against all rationality. He cradled the small, powerful form carefully, listening to the song of the hunter's soft breathing. He willed himself to stay awake, to savor each moment of this incredible experience. The night grew thick around them; the fire slowly dwindled. Iolaus stirred occasionally, crying out softly once, subsiding as Hercules tightened his arms and dusted careful kisses across the buttery hair. Hercules' heart overflowed, and rained in crystalline tears down his cheeks. Eventually, lulled by Iolaus' soft breathing, he gave up his battle to remain awake and drifted into dreams of a lover with wild, sunny hair and a dangerous smile.



He awoke to the sensation of searching lips on his throat, and opened his eyes to find the golden lover of his dreams still clasped in his arms. He tightened his grip slightly, savoring the sensation of the warm touch, until gentle nibbles were added in the mix. Gasping, he pulled away slightly, his arousal growing by bounds as he took in the sight of the slightly dilated blue eyes, the brush of heightened color in Iolaus' face, his quiet, accelerated breathing. Then Iolaus began kissing him.

Hundreds of kisses? Thousands? All soft, melting questioning. He didn't know, or care, how long they lay in the soft dawn light, kissing. Long enough, certainly, for Iolaus to steal his breath, his soul, his heart. Iolaus' hands wandered across his chest and back, and he allowed his own hands comparable liberties, tracing the hard, rounded curves of Iolaus' chest, his fingers thrilling as they touched the dusting of fine, flaxen hairs scattered over his breastbone. Iolaus made a soft sound and kissed his way across Hercules' face, to discover and claim an earlobe. He sucked at it slowly, biting it tenderly, creating a new universe of tantalizing torment for Hercules.

Iolaus raised his head to meet Hercules' eyes; his own were wide, wonder-filled. Holding the gaze, he ran his hands over Hercules' chest, then ducked his head and began nibbling at one of the demigod's nipples through the fabric of his tunic. Hercules had never known such a sensation. His eyes closed and his hands stilled against Iolaus' back. When Iolaus gently pulled the cloth aside and resumed his ministrations on the hard little nub of flesh, a low growl found its way past Hercules' lips. Iolaus was murmuring again against Hercules' flesh, so softly that the words could not be heard, yet they were as clear as though he'd shouted them. This was need, this was passion. This was love, and there had to be more — now...forever.

He fought for control as Iolaus' hands wandered down the flat plane of his stomach, while his mouth became acquainted with the demigod's other nipple. Those small, strong hands paused briefly when they encountered the leather of Hercules' pants, then one slid further down, lightly brushing the yearning hardness straining against the restrictive clothing. Hercules arched his back as the questing hand cupped him gently, carefully stroking him. He shook his head to clear it, not wanting to let himself be overwhelmed by sensation this time.

"It's your turn, Iolaus," he whispered, pulling Iolaus away from his chest and shifting to lay him back against the leaves.

He sought the sweet, talented mouth for another series of breathtaking kisses. When he found the strength to tear himself away, he explored the strong, warm throat, and discovered a tender hollow behind each ear. To his great delight, he learned that the tiniest pressure of teeth and tongue at these sensitive little spots caused the most wonderful sounds to bubble from Iolaus' delicious lips. He tested this theory several times, then moved on to open the grey vest and taste the blond hunter's glorious torso.

Iolaus responded to him with complete, unabashed openness, his moans and sighs coloring the morning air, his body trembling under Hercules' touch. He raised up on his elbows to allow Hercules to slip the vest away

from his broad shoulders, and Hercules had to stop for a moment, to carve that vision into his memory. Iolaus' always unruly golden hair was a disheveled cloud around his flushed, glowing face. His long eyelids and thick, curling lashes partially shielded his darkened blue eyes. His mouth was swollen, so dark that the healing cut on his lower lip was almost invisible. Hercules saw it nonetheless, and took its message to his heart.

He pulled his lover to his pounding heart as he slid the vest completely off, then pulled his own tunic away, letting it drop on the ground beside the vest. A memory struck him: the same two articles of clothing, lying on the straw. Iolaus, gleaming in the soft, golden light of the barn's lamps, ready to instruct Hercules in the fine art of Eastern fighting. He smiled at the picture, then focused once again on the glorious present, as Iolaus pulled him down, both of them moaning as bare flesh melted together. Hercules resumed his explorations, lingering over the long lines of muscle bracketing Iolaus' navel.

He raised himself again, placing a questioning hand on the buckle of Iolaus' belt, waiting for permission or refusal.

"Yes. Please."

He swallowed against an unexpected rush of nervousness as he removed the belts, his mind shying from the memory of the last time he'd touched them. He placed them to the side, and tackled Iolaus' boots before turning trembling fingers to the task of opening the codpiece and removing the pants. He did so slowly, turning the leather back slightly and letting his eyes, then his fingers, and finally his lips touch the tender flesh of Iolaus' hipbones, and the tempting hollow between. When Iolaus' hips arched up under his mouth, he slowly pulled the pants away, sitting up to lay them aside, then turning back, almost fearfully, to gaze upon his lover's naked body.

"You are too beautiful, Iolaus."

He bent forward to take Iolaus into his arms, but was stopped by a gentle hand against his

shoulder. Iolaus' eyes were hot on his, as the hunter reached forward and began unlacing one of Hercules' boots. He disrobed the demigod with seductive slowness, breaking eye contact only when necessary to guide his actions. His hands glided over Hercules' skin as he pulled the woven pants down and off. Then he lay at Hercules' side and began raining more of his tantalizing kisses on his neck and shoulders.

Hercules pulled him close. They wrapped around one another with the peculiar, languid urgency which had become the language of their bodies. Their mouths met and clung; there was no longer a clear division between them. By the time Hercules slipped down to learn the scent and taste of Iolaus' marble shaft, its shape and texture were as familiar to him as that of his own hands, which trembled as they surrounded this precious gift. He drank it in; the throbbing heat under his lips and tongue, and the shuddering, moaning responses of the incomparable lover under his hands, became his world. Hercules, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, didn't exist, had never existed. He was transformed; his whole being revolved around this experience. He felt the gathering under his mouth and hands. His own body shuddered in response as Iolaus finally offered up the hot streams of his seed. Hercules lay for a moment, resting his head on his lover's trembling thigh, until Iolaus pulled him up into his arms, his tongue searching for his own essence in Hercules' mouth.

Iolaus reached for Hercules' erection to find it covered with satiny fluid. He looked questioningly at Hercules.

"You were so beautiful," was Hercules' answer.

Nothing more needed to be said.



The journey back took considerably longer than the journey out had done. Often the sun had barely passed its zenith when they began, by unspoken, mutual consent, to search for a secluded spot in which to camp. They came together gently and fiercely, made love with

aching slowness and with blazing rapidity. Each night they slept wrapped tightly in one another's arms, and sometimes seemed to be making love before they even awoke.

They talked. Iolaus told Hercules what he could remember of his time with the Minotaur, and his darkened eyes reflected the changes which his experience had wrought. The rape of a captured warrior was common enough in some kingdoms, but neither Hercules nor Iolaus had ever before had to face such a price. For this, and for what had occurred between them after the Minotaur's death, they needed a new language in which to communicate, a way to heal the wounds which no herb could ever touch. Hercules depended upon his love for Iolaus to lead him across this unknown terrain.

Iolaus didn't say what he was using as his guide. He would when he was ready. Now, he just wanted to reclaim his life. The rest would come when it came. He lost himself in Hercules' touch and presence, keeping a small corner to himself. A part of Iolaus' soul which was not to be touched — not yet.

Despite the lingering journey, the inevitable moment of parting came. Before he headed toward Padraia and then home, Iolaus pulled Hercules away from the main road and kissed him until they were both shaking.

He managed his usual blazing smile up at the demigod as he stepped away, trying to ignore the crippling sensation of loss which flooded through him. Hercules, though, pulled him back for another embrace, closing his eyes and burying his face in Iolaus' hair.

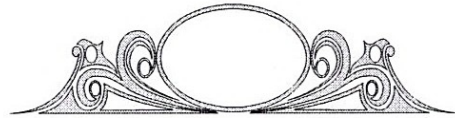
"I love you, Iolaus."

"How could you help yourself?" Iolaus quipped, not attempting to hide the tears which sparkled in his brilliant blue eyes.

They parted quietly at the crossroads. Hercules watched as Iolaus walked away, wondering how he would be able to present a smiling face to his beloved family. His feelings for Iolaus seemed to transcend every other aspect of his existence;

he felt rudderless without him. Attuned to his lover, Iolaus turned, the sun dancing on his hair. He stood for a moment, then disappeared around the bend. Hercules sat on a stump, watching the shadows on the road, remembering Iolaus' touch.

He turned his face toward his farm; his home was walking away from him, headed for Padraia.



GHOST IN THE LIGHTNING

You left me,
screamed your pain, your wounds, your betrayal
to me and then calmly, deliberately, hideously
killed yourself.

Left me to watch my betrayal shatter at my feet,
pool to death as life oozes away,
bright brown windows into a tortured soul,
dim before my eyes and I am left with dross,
ashes in the ground,
a specter to haunt me...forever.

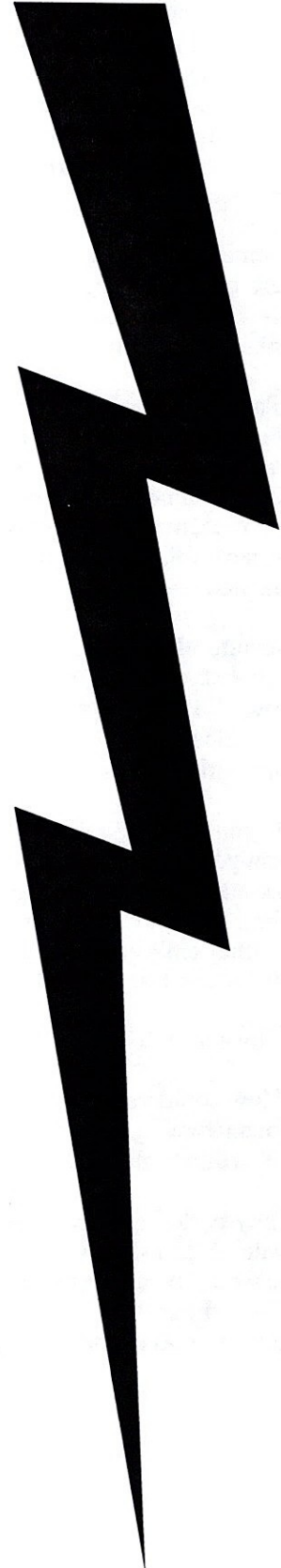
You were lightning, Sonny,
a jolt from the past, linked to the future,
and sizzling throughout my blood for eternity.

And you follow me now, shadowing my steps,
leaping into my dreams to tap-dance on my soul.
Castanets and drums, music from beyond,
scaring with brightness that hiding cannot hide.

You smile.
I wish I had died rather than...kill you.
How did you come to mean so much to me, how did I come to...love you?
How did you get such a grip on me?
Skeletal ties grasp my heart from a cold, cold place.

The darkness grows,
I sink further.
The descent continues, illuminated by a startling smile.
I hear footsteps,
yours,
I hear running...mine.
Am I running to or from the ghost in the lightning?

— R. Hood



DOUBTS



By *R.J. Faas*

Doug Ross woke uneasily. It hadn't been a restful night. The dreams had been repeated over and over again. Mark coming out of the shower just as he walked into the bathroom (well, okay that had really happened the other morning) then it started — he weird moment of frozen time. Doug just stared at Mark's body. Then Mark and he were kissing. Doug shivered, trying not to remember anything else. Then he'd been leaning over Mark's butt, kissing it, licking the entrance, and that was only the beginning. Doug looked down. "Oh no...not you too," he muttered at his hard penis. "Oh God...."

This hadn't happened in years, almost a decade. Back in high school he'd had the same reaction to some of the guys on the football team with him. Back then he'd ignored... all right he'd jerked off after they all left the locker room and then he'd make it with every girl he could find. Old habits died hard and Doug jerked himself off, deliberately picturing every woman he'd slept with...well every woman for the past couple of months.

Probably all because of that damned kid yesterday. Thinks he's gay and opens up to me ...yeah that made sense. Doug wondered if he'd ever hear from the kid. with a father like that ...like me, Doug

thought, a little shocked at the realization. But this was time to ignore all the crap about being attracted to Mark. Doug forced himself to laugh at the very idea. He dressed and headed for work. And yet as he drove toward County General, he couldn't help but wonder if he should mention the dream to Mark.



Mark Greene wasn't having a good day. Hell it hadn't been a good year ...and 1996 was only a few months old. Jen was still calling him, demanding that he sign the divorce papers on her terms ...like he'd been the one to go and have an affair. Then there was the wrongful death suit. God only knows what would become of that whole mess. Mobergster wanted him to settle but that would be adding insult to injury, admitting to being incompetent. Bad enough how he'd lost his own confidence after the whole thing. Then there were the budget cutbacks and this morning's rash of traumas, and Carey Weaver was going on about some other damned run-in with Susan.

"Why'd I ever say I wanted this job?" Having one

person overhear that would be bad enough but three was impossible.

"Because you love a challenge, my friend." Doug stood in the locker room, just off the lounge.

"Because you're a masochist like the rest of us?" Carol Hathaway said, entering the room.

He wouldn't realize Weaver had heard it for a little while, until she started suggesting career counseling. God, that woman could drive someone insane.

Mark looked up at Doug and Carol. Doug looked red-eyed and exhausted.

"Another sleepless night, Doug?" He didn't answer for a moment. He actually looked nervous about answering. "Blonde, brunette, or redhead this time?"

"Uh ...blonde actually, a tall muscular blonde." Doug looked at his feet. That was odd.

Carol didn't seem to notice. "Muscular? Thought you didn't like women who could boss you around?" Oddly Doug didn't come up with any witty response. He just excused himself quietly from the room. "That was weird."

"I'll say. He's been awfully nervous since I spent the night on his couch Monday."

"Another wild night?" Carol had on her mischievous look.

"No, actually, it started when ..." Mark didn't want to mention Doug walking in on him. Carol was game enough to spread it around, and something was bothering Doug. Mark had known him to long to miss something like this.

"When ...what?" Obviously Carol had known Doug long enough to spot something too. Her tone seemed serious and concerned.

"I don't know ...he walked in on me in the bathroom

...and it spooked him or something." Carol giggled. Mark gave her his best be-a-professional look.

"I'm sorry ...but that just seems so weird."

"It did to me too but ..."

"Maybe he was ...jealous of something he saw." Carol started laughing again and Mark couldn't help but smile. She calmed down in a minute and continued. "Probably something else entirely ...maybe this whole thing with his father is bothering him."

"That's probably more like it." They had no more time to discuss the problem. Another trauma was coming in.



Mark was horrified at the trauma that came in. The teenage boy looked as though he'd been beaten to a pulp with something. Part of what looked like a floor lamp was lodged in the kid's upper back. Susan was already on the scene, trying to intubate the kid while rescue workers were sawing most of the lamp away so he could be laid flat. The vitals were bad and falling. No resps, not a surprise when one of your lungs is impaled on a lighting fixture. His pulse was faint and low, not even fifty. Mark listened to Susan and doubted anyone could do anything. Then he realized the boy was still conscious.

"Let's get him some morphine, for the pain and call Doug."

"Mark, do you think morphine's a good idea, he's barely breathing as it is." Mark didn't answer. He didn't have to.

"What've we got here?" Doug's voice sounded strong and sure. "Oh my God." Mark saw the color drain from Doug's face as he spoke. Doug was frozen. "Is he awake?"

Susan nodded. Doug moved to the boy's head. "Did

he do this?" The question was a whisper.

"I told him ..." The boy's answer was a gasp. Then his eyes rolled back. Doug froze, sinking to the floor. The monitor went into the steady drone of cardiac arrest. Susan tried paddles. It didn't work. Mark didn't expect it to. He called the time of death barely three minutes later. Doug didn't move the whole time.



Doug stared at the boy ...Jason had been his name. Jason would still be fine if I'd done something ...said something. Doug felt a fury well up in him — a fury and an emptiness. He stormed out of trauma two, vaulting into the waiting room. The father just stood there, calm as anything.

"Is my son dead yet?" Doug's answer was a kick in the face. The man sprawled on the floor. Doug remembered kicking and yelling and punching in a rage before he was pulled away.



Mark Greene entered the security cubicle quietly. He didn't know if Doug would be allowed to stay at County General — didn't know if he'd be prosecuted. He did know that the man he'd attacked was in the OR right that moment — nothing life-threatening, but a few thousands in damages, at least.

"Doug, you want to tell me what happened?"

"You saw what happened, Mark. The asshole killed his own son ...beat him to death." Doug was unnaturally calm, probably in shock. Mark didn't say anything. He doubted Doug was finished. "And you know what really bites it ...it's my fault."

"Yours? How do you figure that?"

"Oh no, I'm not spilling my guts here ...not for all to see." Whatever bravado Doug had was

disintegrating. "Oh, God, Mark..." Mark was dumbfounded as Doug reached across the cubicle and wrapped his arms around Mark's chest. "Oh, God ..." And then the tears started. They came in terrible body-wrenching sobs that shook Doug to the bone. Mark patted Doug's back, trying to quiet him. The situation was not uncomfortable for Mark, but it was damned strange. Mark had known Doug for years and never seen him upset at all ...and now this.

When Doug had calmed down, Mark authorized him to be released from security. There'd be an in-house investigation soon, until then Doug would be suspended from working. There'd probably be a police investigation too and maybe an arrest. Hopefully, Doug's recent appearance on the news would help shield him, but Mark doubted it would shield much.



"Okay, Doug, we're back in your apartment. Do you want to tell me what's bothering you now?" Mark asked.

"Oh, Mark. You wouldn't understand." Doug sat on the couch, saying nothing.

"Doug, there's going to be a lot of hell to pay over this. If I'm going to try and help you, I've got to know." Mark sat in a chair opposite Doug. He hoped that making it obvious that he wasn't leaving would make Doug talk. I didn't at first."

"You're not going to let this one go, are you?" It wasn't really a question. Doug wiped his face, trying to wipe away the tears, or possibly something deeper. "Okay, it started yesterday when that kid came in, complaining of headaches." Mark nodded. "We did CTs and blood tests, nothing. I asked him if it was stress and ..."

"And?" Doug looked at the ground.

"And he said he was gay ...oh, Mark, I didn't know how to handle it, I didn't handle it. I tried to shove

it off on psych. It was too ..."

"Too strange? Too scary?"

Doug sighed and looked at the ceiling, as though afraid to meet Mark's gaze. Then he looked Mark in the eye. "Yeah, it was scary...but it wasn't strange..." Doug took a shaky breath but his eyes still held Mark's. "You see, Mark...I...sometimes ...I see men and ...I don't know ...I ..." Doug collapsed against the couch.

Mark knew better than to touch Doug. He knew Doug would be scared away by it. "Doug, are you gay?"

Doug sat bolt-upright. "No! I really like women...but sometimes ..." Mark nodded.

"Doug it's not a crime to be bisexual." Doug didn't move. "There's more isn't there?"

Mark had once hit a deer while driving. The look in Doug's eyes was the same as the look in the deer's eyes. Helpless and scared, almost to violence. Doug nodded. "When I saw you the other day ...in the bathroom ..."

"You got turned on by me?" Mark didn't mean to sound as accusatory as he did. But this was too much. It was almost funny, in a way. Doug just nodded reluctantly before moaning. "Doug, I'm flattered but ...what does that have to do with ..." Mark didn't continue as his mind made the connections. "The kid told his father and ..."

"And his father killed him," Doug finished when Mark trailed off. "Mark, I don't ...I'm sorry, I shouldn't be laying all this on you. You've got Jen and that suit ...not to mention Carey Weaver." Mark groaned.

"Don't mention her. She convinced me need counseling, that I'm suffering burn-out."

Doug actually grinned for a moment. "Yeah, Carey Weaver burn-out." They both smiled. Doug's smile faded too quickly.

"Doug, why didn't you ever say anything to me? We've been friends for ..."

"How could I, Mark? You had a wife and everyone knows how crazy I am with women. What could I have said?" Doug was almost yelling.

"I told you a while ago that I'd been involved with a couple of men. I would have though."

"That I could trust you? We all do stupid things when we're young, Mark." Doug stood up and started pacing. Mark stood, too.

"I wasn't all that young. In fact the last time was the night before my wedding." Mark's words were barely audible. He'd never spoken of that to anyone. He was shocked that he'd mentioned it now, almost ten years later.

Doug was shocked too. "How many times?"

"Three: once when I was eighteen, another time in my late twenties, right after a girlfriend ran off with my roommate. I thought that would last. We were actually together for four months. And then, right before I married Jen, I went out and picked up the first guy I saw. I don't even know why I did it."

They were both silent for a while, just standing staring at each other. Doug broke the silence first. "Is it nice?" he asked in a whisper. Mark could see him fighting back tears.

"Nice?"

"Being bi ...being with ...a.. man." Doug's voice broke on the last word and he couldn't keep the tears in. Mark didn't know if he was really helping or not by reaching out and embracing Doug, but he couldn't let that much pain go. Doug cried into his shoulder while Mark made calming noises in his ear. "So is it nice?" Doug asked again when the tears had stopped.

"Yeah, it is."

"Could you ...you know ...show me?" Mark backed

away for a minute. He looked into Doug's blue eyes. They seemed depth less.

"Are you sure?" Doug nodded and Mark saw a sincere yearning in his eyes. The same earning he saw in his daughter's when Jen kept them apart. And despite the knowledge that this wasn't right, that it would upset their friendship and working relationship, he nodded. Besides our relationships got to change after this anyway.

Mark drew Doug closer. He kissed Doug's ear and stroked his cheek before locking his mouth against Doug's. Doug seemed almost startled by the kiss but he didn't fight it. After a moment's surprise, he returned it, exploring Mark's mouth timidly and yet passionately. Mark moaned into the kiss. They broke apart. "You are one hell of a kisser." Mark whispered. Doug just smiled. They kissed more and Mark's hands felt their way down Doug's back, examining all the hard muscles, slipping into his pants. Doug gasped but didn't pull away as Mark's fingers stroked his buttocks through the silk briefs. Doug moaned. Then he felt Mark's finger probing between his cheeks and he stiffened.

Mark pulled away. "I'm sorry, I should have —"

"No, it was just a surprise ...maybe we should get undressed?"

Mark just nodded and they both stripped, avoiding each other's eyes as they did. But then there bodes were pressed together again. Doug moaned as skin touched skin, as his hard cock met Mark's. Mark bent over and licked and tongued Doug's nipples, while he continued exploring Doug's butt. Doug gasped but didn't draw away. "I have some lube in the bathroom."

Mark broke away from Doug's chest. "Do you want me to..."

Doug was silent, afraid to voice the request. Yeah, I do. I'll go get it."

Mark waited nervously but Doug returned quickly. "How should we do this?"

Mark thought for a moment. "The best way would be for you to get on the floor on your knees." Doug complied without comment and Mark was struck by the trust Doug was showing in him. He kneeled down next to Doug and stroked Doug's back, his hip and inner thighs. Then he gently touched Doug's cock. Doug gasped and then moaned, "please ..."

Mark lubed Doug gently, relaxing the sphincter and probing with one finger into the warm orifice. Then, as Doug relaxed he inserted another and then a third. Then he lubed himself. "Okay, Doug here we go." He gently pressed Doug onto all fours before pressing his cock against Doug's asshole. Then he slowly entered Doug. Doug gasped and moaned. "Does it hurt? Do you want me to stop?"

"No...more..." Doug's moaned. Mark pressed in more and then slowly withdrew a little. Doug gasped. His muscles tightened, causing waves of sensation through Mark's cock. Mark moaned Doug's name. Then he thrust again ...and again and again. Mark tried to be gentle but it had been so long since he'd had sex with anyone, another man particularly, that he slowly lost control to his instincts. Doug was groaning pleasure.

Mark stopped himself before he came. "Doug ...I'm going to shoot it soon. Do you want me to?" Doug thrust himself back against Mark. Mark felt himself shooting into Doug, who gasped and moaned. Mark began to withdraw himself.

"Mark ...it feels nice ...with you in ...me. Can you just stay a little while?" Doug sounded embarrassed and yet desperate.

"Sure...I...sure." Mark straightened up from Doug's back, pulling Doug upright with him. He reached around for Doug's cock and stroked it. Doug came almost immediately and then he fell back against Mark.

They stayed like that for a while. Mark wondered if Doug had fallen asleep. He shifted, beginning to remove his now soft cock from Doug's body. "Thank you, Mark," Doug whispered, turning and

kissing Mark's neck.

Doug fell asleep. Mark carried him to the bed and cleaned them both up. He wanted to join Doug on the bed but he didn't. He was too exhausted to drive home, so he curled up on the couch, as usual. But he couldn't sleep. He couldn't do much but wonder what would happen after this. And he relived the night in his mind, enjoying every moment of it.



Anticipations ...

Doug was gone when Mark woke. Mark sighed, disappointed but not surprised. It was probably for the best. They both needed time to think. Last night had been incredible but the sheer desperateness of the encounter stripped some of the joy from it.

Mark dressed. He had at least two hours before he had to get to work. He toyed with idea of calling in sick. He didn't feel up to facing anyone today. God knows, I don't feel up to dealing with this whole thing about Doug, even if I could be objective. Mark wondered if he'd ever be able to be objective about Doug's performance. This was why relationships at work don't, he thought. And yet distance, emotional or physical, could be just as toxic. Jen had proved that to him.

Before he could think anymore, his beeper went off. He recognized the number as Morgenstern's. Reluctantly, he returned the call.

"Mark, I know you're not due in for a while, but I was wondering if you could come in early to meet with me and someone from risk management about the altercation Doug Ross had yesterday.

"Actually, I'm not feeling too well. I was just about to call in sick."

"Mark, I think that we really need to get a jump on this thing. Could you come in at ...say 12:30?"

"With painkillers, I could." Mark didn't mean to sound flippant. This was serious, more so because

of last night, but serious enough anyway.

"Great, I'll see you then." Morgenstern hung up.

"Yeah, great," Mark muttered. He tried Doug's car phone and got the phone-is-turned-off message. No surprise there.

Mark wondered how things would play out between him and Doug. Of course, that was mainly up to how Doug reacted to the situation. Still Mark found himself ambivalent about any of the outcomes. Doug was attractive and the idea of a real relationship was appealing, if unlikely. They were great friends and it would be wonderful to have that carry over into a long term relationship. Still, Doug's track record was far from steady. Mark thought part of that might be from his trying overcompensate for his desire for men.

More likely, Doug would try to pretend the night had never happened. Mark tried to pretend that wouldn't bother him. But it would. He couldn't have casual sex like Doug did. Sex was more than that, it was a sharing of self, a vulnerability that was too precious to be scattered. And Doug had been wholly vulnerable to him last night. Mark tried to imagine what work would be like, if Doug still had a job after this afternoon. Could he stand working with him? Mark remembered Doug's ass surrounding him, Doug's desperate joy at being penetrated.

Mark decided he needed air, needed to be distracted. After all, he couldn't decide what would happen for the two of them. No sense dwelling on it. But walking the streets of Chicago did nothing to ease the ache inside him. He kept seeing couples: men and women walking together, sometimes with children. The images reminded him of himself and Jen when they were first married.

Mark hadn't intended to go anywhere when he left Doug's apartment. He certainly hadn't meant to head to one of Chicago's gay-ghettoes. Yet here he was, surrounded by men who loved men. Many of them were in couples, reminding him of John and himself, over fifteen years ago.

Mark even found the bar he'd fled to the night before his wedding. Little had changed about it in ten years. He stopped in a coffee shop. He sat alone watching the people, wondering if he and Doug would become another of the couples that passed through here. His heart yearned for it but his head rejected the idea as unlikely and troublesome.

When Mark entered County General, he was no clearer to a solution than when he'd started walking. He took the elevator up to Morgenstern's office. Even before he entered he recognized the voice of the woman in the office. Diane Leeds would make matters a lot harder to deal with.

Both of them stood as he entered. He's never dealt with Diane in a professional matter, though he'd met her several times while she was dating Doug. Before Doug cheated on her. As Morgenstern introduced them, Mark realized she'd been promoted to VP of Risk Management. Mark sighed inwardly.

"I won't make the explanation long, since we all know about what happened with Dr. Ross yesterday afternoon," Morgenstern began, his voice the picture of authority. "Pediatrics had already renewed Dr. Ross's grant, so there is no reason to discuss the matter of funding." Mark breathed a silent sigh of relief. "But this conduct is not something we can tolerate. Both Dr. Ross and this hospital are liable for Mr. Smythe's injuries. What we need to do is decide how to proceed."

Diane spoke next, something that made Mark more comfortable, letting him see he was up against. "This is not the first incident of this type for Dr. Ross. In fact there are two other such incidents on file, plus several threats for the way he has verbally harassed parents in the past. We do not believe he can be in an unsupervised situation and that he is a liability to this hospital."

Mark felt compelled, though they all knew the fact, to point out that all the cases Diane mentioned were positive child abuse cases. Each of which had been prosecuted and resulted in the parents in question losing custody.

"True," Diane agreed. "But the ends don't justify the means. He may have been instrumental in aiding these children but his methods are highly suspect and dangerous."

"Diane, I know you're a parent, as well as me," Mark said. "If someone was abusing your child to the degree that these children are being abused, you can't tell me you wouldn't want to do what Doug did to them."

Surprisingly, she smiled. "You're right, Dr. Greene. But I am not the one being discussed. Dr. Ross has, although he does work through the proper channels in abuse cases, taken the law into his own hands. That what the law is for, justice not revenge."

Mark wondered if Diane Leeds wasn't using this as a forum for revenge against Doug, but better not to bring the matter up. Not yet anyway. Morgenstern spoke for the first time in the meeting. "Ms. Leeds, what does risk-management think would be an equitable solution?"

"Dr. Ross, should he remain at County General, must be supervised. Any suspected abuse cases must immediately be relegated to the attending physician. Also, he would need extensive counseling. We would also require a specific insurance policy from him, covering any liabilities of practice, rather than having him fall under the hospital's umbrella policy for practicing physicians. I would also recommend that he, at least, double his malpractice insurance coverage."

"So you are not in favor of dismissing him?" Morgenstern sounded surprised.

"Me, personally? I think he should be replaced with a competent third-year resident, which would save funding, or by another pediatrician. None, however, in the area share his experience with emergency care. The hospital's position, is that he is suspended, without pay, until all legal matters in this case are resolved. This attitude is a direct result of his recent notoriety." She added the last sentence coldly. She had not forgiven Doug. And Doug had spent months getting over her.

"Dr. Greens, do you think Dr. Ross would agree to these terms? " Mark doubted it, particularly the counseling. He said so, and that he had problems with some of the ideas as well. They proceeded to negotiate.



The meeting took up most of the afternoon. Whether for personal or professional reasons, Diane Leeds did not want Doug back for as long as she could manage. In the end, Mark hoped they'd come to something Doug would agree to, but he had his doubts.

Mark checked in at the ER, Weaver cited another problem with Susan but that was par for the course. It had been a quiet day. Carol looked worried, whether about Doug, himself, or some other reason he didn't know. He asked if anyone had heard from Doug, no one had. Mark started to worry.

He tried Doug's apartment first. No one was there. He called his own answering machine, no messages. He looked around, there was little he could do but wait. He looked in the kitchen. The meeting and wandering had left him not eating very much. Doug didn't have much. Mark opened a can of soup. For a moment he saw a future of him and Doug together, sharing such a simple domestic moment. The image brought tears to his eyes.

On inspiration, Mark checked Doug's messages. Most were from himself. One from a stewardess Doug was supposed to have picked up. And one was from Doug, himself.

"Mark, if you get this ...I...don't worry, I'm okay but I need some time....last night ...it was great but I...don't worry." The message ended. The microwave beeped. Mark didn't move. Doug's gotta be taking this hard, Mark thought. He sighed. Doug wasn't one for sharing his feelings.

As the shock started to wear off, his pager beeped. He looked at the number, not recognizing it. For an instant his heart lifted as he thought it was from

Doug. He called back. Carol's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Carol?"

"Mark, yeah, I just got the weirdest visit from Doug. He left something here for you."

"Is he okay, what did he say?" And what did he leave? Mark wondered.

"He didn't say much. He asked if I was really his friend, if he could count on me no matter what. Then he said something bizarre about not being who everyone thinks he is." She paused. "Then he said only you had seen the real Doug and then he left this envelope of stuff and left."

"That's it? He didn't say anything about yesterday or about me?" Mark was tense. What if Carol found out about the two of them? What if the ER staff or hospital board found out?

"That's it. Do you have any idea what it means?"

"Yeah, I think I do." He hesitated. She waited, as though she expected him to tell her, he'd probably have done the same, but he couldn't tell her. Instead he asked if he could stop over and get the package, whatever it was. She said yes, and he headed out, his soup forgotten.



Doug sat in the bar, too afraid to go home, yet afraid to stay. He'd drunk more than he should have. And if he stayed, he'd only drink more. But the fuzziness of the alcohol didn't diffuse Mark from his thoughts, the way he'd hoped. Instead, the feel of Mark's body permeated his thoughts. Mark's hands roaming his body, their mouths clasped together. The warm strength of Mark's embrace, which made Doug feel safe in a way he never had before. Mark's cock pressing into him, Mark's chest against his back. And yet it was the safe feeling of Mark embracing him that he wanted most.

Though the alcohol kept him from realizing or acknowledging it, Doug had fallen in love with Mark Greene. He had opened up his deepest secret and instead of running, Mark had made that long repressed dream come true. But where did that leave them now. Doug wanted that feeling of safety, yearned for it in a way he couldn't name or ignore. But what about everyone else. He couldn't leave them out of it. He couldn't share this with his mother. And he'd barely met his father, barely begun to understand him. What about Carol, how would that make her feel, knowing she was just a tool in his self-deception. To say nothing about how Jen would use this to hurt Mark.

He ordered another scotch without even thinking. He was beyond thinking. He dimly realized that he didn't even care about what happened at work, just to the people he would hurt if he allowed himself to be selfish about wanting Mark. Nor did it occur to him that Mark might want him.

Doug didn't even realize the woman had sat down. He wasn't sure when she started flirting with him, but he did know it disgusted him. It seemed so shallow and he wanted Mark's arms around him to take it all away. He lurched off the barstool, stumbled to the street and headed for his car.



Mark sat in the mini-van outside Carol's, looking at the plain manila envelope. He was reluctant to open it. Carol had asked him to come in, to talk about Doug. Probably even about himself. She had to have noticed how out of it he seemed. He declined and now he sat here.

What was it that scared him so about opening the envelope? One way or another, he'd find an answer to at least some of the questions he had about Doug. Yet he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answers. So he sat there for ten minutes, doing nothing, then he drove. He didn't know where to go. Home? To an apartment that still held things Jen had thrown at him unpacked? Doug's felt more like home to him. His stomach clenched on the idea, wanting Doug's

to be his home. Maybe Doug would be there.

Eventually the indecision got to him. He pulled into the parking lot of a small restaurant, parked under a street light and opened the envelope. Inside were pictures of him. Him at work, with Doug, with Jen and Rachel. There were words written on the back. 'Can I ask you to give this up? How could you choose me over this? I wish we could be more than this. I'm sorry I pushed you.' Mark felt tears rolling down his cheeks. The memories each photo held were special. How long had Doug kept them, wished for more? There was a note in the envelope.

'Mark, this is hard. Last night I felt something I used to dream of, something I knew I could never have. I wish we could have it grow, but we can't. I don't know what to do, but I know that County means a lot more to you than me. I'll find another job. I don't want to force anything. I don't want to see anything hurt you, ever. And that's what would happen otherwise. Good bye, Doug.'

Mark laid his head on the steering wheel and wept. The tears head bottled up since Jen had the affair, the longing for Doug, the feeling that Doug would leave, it all blended together in a senselessness that took any meaning out of his life.

It was a long time before he moved. He shoved everything back into the envelope, angry. Just like Doug to think this was all about him, to not consider what Mark wanted. How many times had he told Doug that about women, never realizing the depth of pain it caused. How dare he just think it was all up to him to say who got hurt and who didn't! Anger fueled his movements as he shifted into gear and roared out of the parking lot, headed for Doug's building.



Doug woke slowly, his head hurting. It was still dark out. Where am I? He realized he'd fallen asleep, or passed out more likely, behind the wheel. He was still parked at the curb near the bar. Well, *at least I didn't kill anybody*. The thought didn't offer

any comfort. He felt a little bit better, emotionally, and worse physically. He felt his stomach heave and opened the door just in time to throw up in the street.

Doug was scared. He was afraid to drive, but he couldn't stay here. Impulse or instinct took over and he dialed a number on his car phone. He shivered when the voice on the other end spoke. "Hello?" Doug didn't answer immediately. The voice repeated itself.

"Mark, I need you." Doug's voice was small and weak. Yet he smiled as he spoke. Then he felt his stomach roll again and he heaved in the street again.

"Doug? Where are you?" Mark's voice was neutral, almost cold. Doug shivered but he didn't smile this time. He almost hung up, but he did need help, he couldn't deny it, not here and not now. He told Mark. He thought he heard Mark curse under his breath before he said. "Hang on, I'll be there soon." The phone clicked as Mark hung up.



Mark was still angry as he drove towards the bar Doug had told him. Now his anger had another fury. How could Doug even think to call him after leaving such a note! And there was a part of Mark Greene that reveled in the faint but obvious connection he still shared with Doug Ross. He slowed as he spotted Doug's car. He doubled parked next to it. Doug crawled into the passenger seat. The smell of alcohol permeated the car. Mark said nothing. He couldn't trust himself to say anything. He was still too angry. Doug just sat back in the seat, looking grateful. Mark drove to Doug's apartment and left him there.

"Thank you. I know how hard — "

"No, Doug, you don't. I'll be here tomorrow morning. Be sober, we've got a lot to talk about." Mark sped off, not knowing where he was going and not caring.



Mark was surprised he slept as well as he did. Still, the calm solace of sleep was gone far too quickly when he woke. He didn't want to face Doug. It was hard enough to even think about him. They'd been friends for years. With Jen gone, Doug was the closest thing to family that Mark had. Mark pictured Doug, trying to formulate some idea of what he wanted to say. Nothing came, just Doug's image, whole and Godlike in his nakedness. Mark felt his cock twitch. Oh God, the other night had been so incredible — the possibilities so wonderful. Mark replayed that night, his cock hardening.

Meanwhile, Doug was waking, his cock already hard. He'd dreamt all night. Even the memories of the dreams sent shivers down his spine. He could almost feel Mark's hand gripping his cock. He imagined it was Mark's hard-on he was grasping and not his own.

Mark felt his hand move, almost of its own volition, to his groin. He felt it stroke his cock lightly before clutching it with a frantic intensity. He pumped slowly, lightly for a little while before he tightened his grip. He imagined he could hear Doug's resonant voice crying out "Tighter, harder!"

Doug was jerking quickly, driving himself toward a hard quick orgasm. Mark would be taking it slow, if there one encounter was any indication. But Doug felt an urgency in his soul. A drive to reach the height of orgasm, even at the expense of slow long pleasure. Something deep was driving him on. He held his cock tighter, pumping so quickly his arm ached. His other hand wound its way around his balls, holding them, pulling on them.

Mark had lost all thought. He only wanted to feel Doug's hands on his cock and balls, wanted to believe that they were Doug's hands not his own. In his head he still heard Doug crying out in pleasure and desperation. He could see Doug in his mind. Alone, jerking furiously. The image frozen in Mark's mind as he held the steel of his hard on as tight as he could. He could feel orgasm approaching.

He gripped tightly and thrust himself upward.

Doug felt the warm rush of sensations run along his cock, almost to an orgasm. Mark's image was almost there too. They were so perfectly matched in their pleasure. Doug wanted it, wanted him. No matter what Doug knew now that he wanted Mark Greene and nothing else. He grasped himself tighter than he ever had, ready to bring himself over the edge.

Mark gave up all thought except the image of Doug as the climax overtook him.

Doug's voice pierced the air as he felt the incredible power of his orgasm blot everything else. He would dimly realize later that it was Mark's name he was calling out.

And in another room, Mark cried out with just as strong an orgasm, Doug's name on his lips. And he knew at that moment that he wouldn't be able to rest until he was in Doug's arms again.



Doug was up making breakfast when Mark arrived. He wasted no time after opening the door. "Mark, we have to talk." He didn't even give Mark a chance to speak. "Last night, was stupid. I thought it would...make me forget how I feel about you. But I don't want that. Mark, I know what I said in that note ...and most of it's true, I can't ask you to give up so much, I shouldn't ...but Mark, I need you." Doug looked like he was holding back tears. He looked weak but sure.

Mark's heart swelled at the thought. He isn't going to fight me. But Mark couldn't give in, not yet. Despite how badly he wanted to feel Doug's strong, warm, sexy embrace, Mark had to make sure they both knew what they were getting into.

Mark stepped forward, his body almost in contact with Doug. Their eyes were only inches apart. "Are you sure Doug? I can't lie through many more nights like last night. I can't deal with anyone

cheating on me and then leaving, not this soon. And it's not going to be easy. We've got a lot to face, with us and with other people."

Doug looked heartbroken. "I know...it's selfish of me..." Doug's eyes clouded, tore broke loose from their beautiful blue depths and Mark couldn't hesitate, couldn't refuse himself or Doug any longer.

Mark's arms encircled Doug's body. His mouth hovered near Doug's ear as he whispered, "Doug, I love you. I can't even imagine not going with this, with you." His mouth shifted to Doug's lips. The kiss blotted out whatever Doug might have said. Mark felt tears against his face. They were Doug's but they were also his. Mark felt the power and joy of Doug's body, felt himself melt in that kiss. Nothing else mattered for that moment, and it last for so long Mark thought it might never end.

They broke apart, more to catch their breath than a desire to stop kissing. Mark felt reality intrude upon them. Yet Doug's presence, his love, made that intrusion less painful than he expected it to be.

"Doug, we've got to talk ...not about us, well have time. But Morgenstern needs some answers soon ...I'm sorry."

Doug smiled, wiping his tear-stained face. "Don't be."



Premonitions ...

"Something going on with Doug and Mark." Carol said to Susan Lewis. It was a slow day.

"How can you tell anything's going on with Doug? He's been on suspension for nearly three weeks?"

"Yeah, but first Mark calls in sick..." Carol let Susan fill in the blanks.

"Which he never does, no matter how sick he is."

"And then four personal days in the next two weeks before a sudden vacation?" Carol looked at Susan as though there could be no denying the reasoning.

Susan wasn't that ready to give in. "Mark's in the middle of a divorce and a lawsuit, plus Doug's his friend ...he probably just needed some time to cool off."

"And that strange envelope I told you about?"

"Now, that is weird. What was in it?" Susan was glad the day was slow. This was an interesting line of thought, even if nothing came of it.

"I don't know, Mark took and left quickly. But he was acting really weird that night."

"Hmmm...so what do you think it means?"

Carol shrugged. "I'm not sure, but something peculiar's going on."



"Oh God, Doug," Mark gasped as Doug thrust his cock harder. Mark lay on his back, looking at his lover. Doug thrust into Mark's ass, causing Mark to cry out again. Then Doug tickled Mark's legs as they hung over his shoulders.

"You know, Mark, I never would have thought of this position with a man." Mark grinned.

"Guess that makes me the expert in this relationship. Quite a change for you, huh Doug?" Doug smiled and stroked Mark's nipples for a little.

"I love you, Mark. You showed me I could have a relationship like this." Doug leaned down to kiss him. Mark felt his hips protest but he forced himself to let Doug bend over and do it. Then Doug was fucking him more. Now it was harder, deeper. The play had given way to the intense desire that was part of their relationship. Mark groaned deeply. Doug gasped. Mark played with his cock, stroking it in time with Doug's thrusts.

Mark felt Doug tense and slow his thrusting. Doug always did that before he came, as though to preserve that one precious moment. Then Doug's eyes locked with his and he thrust once more. Mark saw Doug's body tense, felt his cock press deeper inside him as it shot Doug's sperm into him. Doug's face turned into the most beautiful combination of pleasure and vulnerability Mark had ever seen. Mark loved that look. He'd slept with a few men before Doug and some women, but none had ever had that beautiful joy and innocence when they climaxed. Mark thought anything was worth seeing Doug like that.

Doug relaxed, smiled, and pulled himself out of Mark's body. He grinned at Mark for only a moment before his mouth dove for Mark's erection. Mark gasped as Doug's lips grazed the head, taking the whole cock without warning. He moaned as Doug's hands reached out to stroke his balls. The sensation was incredible. Doug's tongue explored him, tickled him, and finally stroked along him as Doug slid his mouth along the hard cock. Mark thrust his hips up into Doug's face, almost afraid he would gag him. He felt his orgasm coming. "Doug..." It was barely a whisper, a second before he came, his body convulsing in waves of pleasure. Doug kept sucking, kept stroking, prolonging the glorious pleasure.

Mark lay there, drained, relaxed and joyous. "For someone who's only been having sex with another man for nineteen days, you sure know your way around a cock."

Doug laughed, honest happiness on his face. Mark drank in the sight. Doug was always gorgeous, but never so much as now, when he let himself be totally free.

"Yeah, well just you wait till we're back at work. Quickies in the trauma room just ain't my style." They both laughed for a moment, but it was a laughter tainted by doubt. They both knew that returning to work would be hard.

"Doug, no matter what happens, I'm not going to lose you." Mark felt serious suddenly, irritated that

this had to be so hard.

"Don't worry, I've had plenty of experience as a night in shining armor." Doug kissed his neck.

"Or a two-timer in dark apartments." Mark knew head made a mistake as soon as he said the joke.

"Not this time Mark, not with you." Doug's kiss was even harder, almost desperate.

"I know, Doug, I'm sorry."

"That's okay." Doug tried to smile but couldn't quite manage it. The phone rang. Mark reluctantly shifted so Doug could answer it.

While Doug talked on the phone, Mark got dressed. He knew that they were going to have to do something soon. This respite from work and everyday life that they'd had was nothing if not perfect. But it would end, and they'd be back at work. Jen would soon be pestering him and he knew it would all be a strain for the two of them.

Doug hung up the phone. "Mark, I've got to go downtown."

"The DA's office?" Doug nodded. "Good news?"

"Pretty much. They've got a plea bargain. If I testify against Smythe, only community service and six months probation."

"You were going to testify anyway."

"Yeah, but Jeneane didn't want them to know that." Mark could see that strategy. Doug was lucky to have Jeneane as a lawyer, but then so was Mark, considering his soon to be ex-wife was one already.

"Let's go then."

Doug hesitated, his shoulders slightly slumped. "Mark, this things going to involve a lot of gay-rights groups ...maybe we shouldn't..."

"Be seen together?" Mark finished. "Doug, I'm not

going to let you go though this alone."

"I know, but work? Not to mention Jen." Doug looked lost. Mark reached out and held him.

"Doug ..."

"For your sake, just wait till the divorce is final, till you've got at least partial custody." Mark knew that was for the best. He knew but he really couldn't care.

"All right, I'll let you get this one ...but damned if you'll pull this during the trial." Doug smiled.



It was a fairly routine day in the ER. Mark being gone left Carey Weaver on a warpath. Susan was taking what solace she could during her lunch break. The cafeteria food wasn't all that good, though. And, as she looked at the clock, she groaned. *Oh God, not another five hours of that woman. What the hell is going on with Mark?*

The ER was filled with kids when she got back. All about ten, and all acting strangely. "What's going on?"

"Busload from a field trip," Carol said. "They just got in. Looks like they ate candy laced with LSD."

"How many?"

"Five kids show symptoms, there's 21 on the trip. Weaver's got the five being checked out."

Speak of the devil, Susan thought. The read-headed chief resident was hobbling towards them now. "Susan, I've got pediatrics checking the kids. One looks like an over-dose ad we're going to have to admit. The others should wear off soon. Parents are coming down."

"Okay, great." Susan tried to smile. "Anything else come in?"

"You discharged the chest pain in four?"

"Yeah."

"That's it. But, I was wondering if I could see you in the lounge."

Susan tried not to grimace. After all a grimace was close to a grin, right? "Sure."

Jerry was just coming out of the lounge. "The cookies in their are a gift from the bus driver."

"Thanks Jerry," Susan said.

"That's a thoughtful idea." Weaver said to her.

Susan knew she should reply but what could she say. She didn't want to small-talk with Weaver. Hell, she didn't want to be near her.

Susan picked up a cookie and chewed thoughtfully. *Peanut butter, when's the last time I had these*, she thought idly.

"Susan, I know we've had our differences but I think we really need to work them out." Weaver grabbed a cookie and started munching. Susan didn't answer. She wasn't sure what to say. Actually she was feeling light headed. Carey suddenly had a blank look come over her face. "Tilo? Where'd you come from?" Carey seemed to be looking right at her. Susan turned. No one was behind her. "Tilo, where's Susan?"

Susan started forward, about to say something but the light-headedness was worsening, almost like the effect of a drug. Dimly, Susan realized that it was the cookies that were laced with LSD. Better tell someone, better...

The thought vanished. Susan felt herself falling. When she looked up the lounge was gone. There were foggy shapes, trees maybe. And a blue sky. Someone was standing over her. The woman was gorgeous, at least six feet and blonde. The type of woman any man would fall for. Susan had never thought of herself as bi but something about this

woman was so powerful, so sensuous.

Susan felt the woman touching her, stripping her. The surroundings focused. They were in the woods. The woman was kissing her neck, inching down her breast. Susan felt lips upon her nipple. She gasped, feeling her nipples harden and throb, feeling an ache in her groin.

She grabbed at the strange woman, stroked her back, felt her rounded buttocks. Susan felt her finger inching into the woman's butt cleft. The woman gasped, and sucked harder. Susan moaned. She explored the stranger's body with her free hand. She felt hands stroking up her thighs, between her legs. She was scared but she wanted it. She gasped as the fingers pressed between her lips, stroking her clit. She could swear another mouth had clamped onto her other breast. She felt fingers inside her, probing, eliciting gasps and moans. She felt more fingers slipping into her, felt the wash of moist heat. She could feel the power building. She knew it would happen soon. She clung to the other woman, staring at the tree tops. She felt the first wave of orgasm hit, leaving her shuddering and breathless.

She felt the woman back off. Things were getting blurry, fuzzy. She heard someone protesting, felt the two of them being separated. She didn't want that. Then blackness was coming from a sting in her arm.



"You've got to be kidding." Mark wasn't sure what to think as Carol told him about finding Susan and Weaver making love on the lounge floor.

"No, I'm not. And the lab showed pretty high traces of LSD in the cookies. The bus driver's been arrested. Mark, I separated them and dressed them as best I could. I didn't say anything to anyone."

"That's probably best. If it was that high a level, I doubt they'll remember or realize if they do."

"Who won't remember what?" Doug called from the

bedroom.

"Nothing, Doug." He spoke into the phone again. "Carol, keep them under observation in separate rooms. Do you need me there?"

"No everything's under control..." She hesitated. "Mark what's going on with you and Doug?"

Mark felt as though she'd punched him in the stomach. He forced himself to answer calmly. "What do you mean?"

She hesitated again. "Well...is he okay, he's not having a breakdown, is he?"

Mark breathed a sigh of relief. "No, he's...um, he needs some help with the DA's office." Maybe he should have said Doug was having a breakdown. It made more sense, but that wouldn't be fair.

"Oh, okay, whatever." It was obvious she didn't believe him. "Well Mark, it's quit'n time for me, and she and I are going away, so I'll let you go. I just wanted to let you know about the two lovebirds."

"Oh, first trip together?"

"Yup. I'll let you know whether I think we can live together afterwards. Bye."

Mark smiled. "I think you did the right thing." They hung up.

Mark stood thoughtfully for a moment, wondering what work would be like if Susan and/or Weaver remembered the encounter. He was so lost in thought that he didn't hear Doug approach. But he did feel the strong arms encircle him from behind. Boy, work was going to be fun once they got back, something that wasn't too far off.

"So what did Carol do the right thing about?" Doug whispered in Mark's ear. Mark felt the warm embrace, savoring it. He almost told Doug. Work was going to be interesting. Yet he was looking forward to it, looking forward to a long time with Doug.

"Just a patient confidentiality thing." He turned, reaching up to stroke Doug's hair. They kissed, softly, romantically.

When they broke apart, Doug asked, "So what are we going to do tonight?"

"Celebrate your freedom. The only question is how." Mark looked at Doug. He had a great idea but persuading Doug to do it might be hard. "How about dancing?"

"Great, but you're the one I want to dance with. Wouldn't that be a little odd?"

"Not some places." Mark smiled at the thought.

Doug didn't smile. His expression hardened. Mark watched as he closed himself off emotionally, wishing he wouldn't, wishing he'd never brought the idea up. "I can't Mark. I just can't..." A tear welled in his eye. Doug backed away and sat on the couch.

Mark followed him. "Doug, it's okay." He ran his hand through Doug's hair. It had been too soon for that. Doug was still working at the idea of loving another man. Mark cursed himself for not thinking.

"Maybe..." Doug left the thought unfinished and Mark didn't press him. "We could..."

"Stay right here?"

"And be a homebody? No way. How about spending the weekend in the mountains? Or maybe the whole week, I've got two more weeks before I can go back to work."

Me too, Mark thought. "Camping?" Mark hated camping: the bugs, the cold, the hard ground.

"No, there's a great place not too far. Cabins with fire places and clear starry skies..."

"Sounds good, let's go."



Carol breathed in the cool crisp air. "I love this time of year." She turned to Shep. "This was a great idea, thanks."

"Hey, no problem. I've wanted to get away with you for a long time." His arm slid around her waist. She leaned into him, savoring the kiss as long as possible. "Oh, my God!"

"What? What is it?" She broke away, turning and half-expecting to see some desperate case or tragedy. Their damned jobs were always getting in the way. All she was too men, holding each other around the waist, walking along the path. They rounded a tree and were out of view. "Two guys? That freaks you out? What about that gay partner of yours?" She was teasing him more than wondering.

"But...but...one of them was..." He shook his head.

"Was who? Someone you know?" She reached up, about to kiss him again, make him forget whatever he saw.

"You'll think I'm nuts."

"I will not, whoever they were you saw them. So what." She tried to get him to be more romantic, not let something get in the way of the weekend. He just stared after the two men, then stared at her. "Come on Shep, it no big deal. I trust you."

"One of them was your old boy friend." He stood completely still, waiting for her reaction.

"Tag? Well, that's..."

"No, Doug Ross." Carol couldn't help laughing, sputtering at the very idea of it. "I told you, you wouldn't believe me." Carol fought hard to control her reaction. She knew if she couldn't she'd hurt Shep. But Doug? It was ridiculous, absurd, impossible.

"I'm sorry, Shep," she said when she was finally able to speak again. "But, Christ, that idea is so ridiculous..."

"Maybe it is, but I know what I saw." He didn't seem ready to let go of the idea.

"Well whatever you saw, I think you'll be much more interested in what you're about to see." She pulled him back in from the balcony. In one movement she pulled off her sweater, revealing the bare skin underneath.

"I think you're right."



Doug bent down to light the fireplace. It was a cool spiring night, and the fire turned into the perfect time for romance. Mark turned on the radio he'd brought, looking for a soft-rock station. The music and the firelight were perfect. He laid against Doug in front of the fire, content just to be here, touching his lover.

Mark felt Doug's heartbeat as his head rested against Doug's chest. Doug's arm wrapped around him, Doug's hand ruffling his hair. Mark sighed in contentment. Doug chuckled and leaned down kissing him. The kiss was slow and gentle, lasting for long moments as they explored each other's mouths. Mark felt a hunger in him, in his chest and his groin. "I need you, Doug...I need you in ways I can't even describe."

The bare honesty of the moment showed more in Doug's eyes than his lips could ever say. Mark could drown in those eyes, live in their depths forever. Doug kissed him again, stroking his face, his neck and chest. Doug toyed with Mark's nipple. Mark felt them harden, felt his cock start to follow suit as Doug kneaded softly, whispering Mark's name the whole time. He felt Doug's erection pressing against his hip — felt Doug's hands caressing his. And all the while they were kissing, softly longingly. Mark couldn't take his eyes from Doug's. He moaned as Doug stroked him, fondled his balls and roamed his body with his other hand. Mark felt Doug's hard on slide into the crease of his butt, but no further. The kissing, the gentle stroking was building to an intense orgasm. Mark was

gasping and groaning as the pleasures built and flowed through his body, centered in his groin. He felt his whole body tense in pleasure. The climax came in a gentle but incredible wave, flowing onward for long moments while he gasped Doug's name, feeling wave after wave of pleasure and peace rock through him.

Then, Mark laid back against his lover. "Love you," Doug whispered in his hear. Mark just lay, savoring the moment. Then he rolled over.. Mark's lips glided along Doug's body, kissing every space he could. Pausing to suck and nibble on Doug's nipples, while his hands caressed Doug's asshole, slid along his cock and fondled his balls. "Oh, God...Mark..." Doug moaned and Mark kept sucking him, stroking his cock and pushing his fingers into Doug's ass. Doug groaned and writhed in pleasure. Mark felt his friend stiffening against him, thrusting into his hand and moved his mouth to Doug's. They kissed as Doug came, shooting onto Mark's chest. Mark stared into the eyes of his lover, watching that glorious look of innocence and pleasure as Doug orgasmed. Then, Mark kissed him, whispering, "Love you."



"The weekend was incredible. Shep was so male-protector, but in a good way. And the sex...oh it was just incredible." Susan grinned as Carol spoke.

"Even better than Doug?" *I know this isn't my business*, Susan thought, *but...*

"Hmmm...yeah, loads better." Carol flushed but grinned. "Doug always seemed to be holding back."

"It's been so long, I don't think I'd care if he was holding back, or even notice," Susan said, somewhat resignedly. Carol coughed and started choking.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just um...yeah." Carol recovered but she

had an odd grin on her face, and it broadened as Weaver walked by. "By the way, do you remember anything from Friday?"

"You mean when I tripped out? Not much, just...well having sex with a woman. It was weird."

Carol coughed again but didn't start choking. What the hell happened? Susan wondered. "You know, talking about weird things, Shep was sure he saw Doug with another man this weekend."

"So?"

"Susan, **with another man..**"

"Oh...oh..." Carol's meaning dawned on her. "You're kidding, right?"

"I don't know, +Shep was dead serious."

"Things get stranger and stranger..." *I wonder*, Susan thought.

"You know, I was thinking maybe this has something to do with him and Mark...pretty stupid idea huh?"

"Uh...yeah." *Yeah, unless you know that Mark's bi.* Susan kept the thought to herself.



Mark drove slowly back to Chicago, not wanting to. The past week had been like no other time in his life. It had had the relaxed quality that long time partners have when they on vacation mixed with the freshness and excitement of new love. He looked at Doug. Doug glanced out the window, his face wistful.

"Doug?"

"I was just thinking...wondering how many trips we'll get to take like this."

"Me too." Mark sighed. He jumped as he felt

Doug's hand sliding along his thigh. "Doug, I'm driving!" But Mark really didn't want Doug to move his hand. Doug went to do just that. "No, wait, you just startled me.."

"Okay, I promise not to start jerking you off." Doug looked at him devilishly. Mark grinned back.

"Well, not yet anyway," Mark said. The feeling of Doug's hand, resting in such an erotic and romantic way, made the week not seem over just yet.

They stayed like that, talking about unimportant things until Mark reach the turnpike exit and headed into the city.

"Mark...how are we going to deal with work, with being people we aren't anymore?" Doug was looking at him with the trust of a child, as though any answer he gave would be undoubted.

"I don't know, Doug. We'll just have to wing it." Doug smiled, as though that answer was the one he'd been hoping for.

"All right, but I'm not going to lose you, Mark. Not now and not ever."

"I like that." They smiled at each other as they drove home.



Discoveries...

Mark Greene stared across the space where a gurney had just filled trauma one. Doug Ross stood there. Their eyes met. Doug's lips quirked in a half-smile. Mark felt his do the same. They had a few moments alone as the staff moved the boy to the OR. It was precious few that they'd had over the past three weeks.

The kiss was quick. It was satisfying: feeling Doug's body, the brush of his lips. It was a reminder of the love they shared. But it stirred a yearning

deep inside Mark. He wanted to be able to kiss like that whenever they met. He didn't want to hide what he felt for Doug, didn't want to pretend nothing was going on. And God, it had only been three weeks that they'd been back at work! Three weeks that seemed like months.

They pulled apart quickly, Doug glancing around to be sure no one had seen them. "We..."Mark started.

"We should find a dark quiet place and spend some quality time together." Doug said.

Mark smiled, but it was a sad smile. "The trial's tomorrow, we can't." Doug's beeper went off, ending the conversation.



Doug left trauma one, heading for the desk. It was almost seven. Mark would be off in an hour. Doug in two. Damn, he hated when Mark pushed himself out of the way. Mark knew the trial was important. But not as important as their love. It had all been so nice a month ago. Amid the chaos of his suspension and the freedom that followed it. But, now?

Doug sighed, examining the little girl. He asked the usual questions, read the history Lydia had taken, performed perfectly. And he did all on autopilot. He couldn't think about anything but Mark. Kissing him, licking his skin, feeling Mark's cock sliding into him. Doug's mind diagnosed the possibility of strep throat. His heart thought of nothing but Mark.



Mark waited in Doug's living room. He was tired. Not physically tired, but emotionally exhausted. He heard Doug's key. He saw Doug's face. The exhaustion vanished. The days of not touching, the hours of trying to ignore each other faded away. Mark felt Doug's lips meet his. Felt their tongues collide. His hands stroked Doug's short hair. "Doug...."

Mark gently slid off his lover's jacket. Then slowly he unbuttoned Doug's shirt. Meanwhile, Doug was stroking his back through the old t-shirt. Mark was sighing, falling against Doug's bare chest. He felt Doug's strong heartbeat. Their lips met again, mashing against each other. He kissed Doug's sandy jaw, stroking it with his tongue. Doug's hands continuing their gentle stroking of his back. Mark felt them slip under the waistband of his sweats. He felt Doug grin when they touched his bare butt.

"Obviously you had something in mind for tonight besides resting up for the trial." Mark almost pulled away to argue but he didn't have the strength, and he really didn't want to. He kept kissing Doug, shivering from the caress on his cheeks. Mark had been hard the moment he felt Doug's bare chest against him. Now his cock twitched and throbbed. Though their pants he could feel Doug's hard-on pressing against him.

Moments later they were naked. They kept embracing, as though trying to press themselves into each other. Maybe then they'd be able to endure the time they spent at work. Their cocks rubbed against each other, the contact strengthening a subtle desire to an urgent need. They fell slowly to the floor.

For a moment Doug loomed over him. Then, Doug's cock hung suspended above his face. Mark grasped it, massaging the head with his tongue for just a moment before letting slide into his mouth. He shuddered as he felt Doug lick his own erection. Then they were both sucking, moaning. They were lost in the sensations, thrusting gently into each other. Mark felt so strong and happy in that moment. There was nothing else in the world except him and Doug. Nothing existed beyond the pleasure he was feeling, the soft moans Doug gave was the limit of the universe. He felt himself about to come. He sucked harder. Doug gasped, then brought his hands to Mark's balls, tickling them and pulling gently. Mark lost track of everything as the orgasm overtook him.

Then, Doug was leaning over him. Mark felt the

kiss, tasting himself on Doug's lips. He leaned up, taking Doug's cock again before Doug could move. He sucked it gently, tickling Doug's balls the whole time. Doug was moaning, crying, gasping, and finally coming. Mark reached up, holding Doug firmly while he came. And Mark stared up at Doug's face while he swallowed. Doug was never more beautiful than now.

Slowly, Doug relaxed and Mark gently pulled him down on top of him. Their eyes met. Their simultaneous voices shared the comment their eyes were echoing. "I love you."

They lay like that for a while, just feeling each other, savoring the time. The feel of Doug's legs, the hair gently brushing his nipples began to arouse Mark again. And from the looks of Doug, sprawled across him, Mark wasn't the only one whose penis was hardening again.

"In me?" Doug asked in a whisper. Mark nodded and Doug rose, heading for the bedroom for the lube. Doug still felt frightened by the idea of being penetrated, even though he enjoyed it. It was hard for him to deal with the emotional impact. Mark didn't mind. He felt privileged that Doug trusted him that much.

As Mark rose, his cock hard and ready to be pressed into Doug's wonderful ass, his beeper went off. Mark cursed. Who could it be? Why? And more annoyed, how dare they!

He found the damn thing after fumbling around in the couch. He groaned audibly. The ER! He called back, ready to kill whoever had paged him. "ER?" Jerry's polite voice asked.

"Jerry, just who the hell —"

"Dr. Greene, it's..." Jerry trailed off. Before Mark could speak, Carol came on the phone.

"Mark, it's Jen. She was in an accident." Mark felt his cock go soft in seconds. He felt the blood drain from his face. Yet inwardly he asked himself why.

"Is it bad? Where's...what's his name?"

"Mark, it's bad. Head on, she's unconscious. Probable subdermal hematoma, partially collapsed lung and possible internal bleeding in her abdomen," Carol paused before adding, "She still had you listed as next of kin." Mark was stunned. He knew he was in shock.

"I'll...I...where's Rachel?"

"We don't know."

"Let me find Rachel and I'll be down." He hung up. He barely realized Doug was there until he felt the strong arms surrounding him. Mark felt himself start to cry. He tried not to but he couldn't help it. He still loved Jen, was still hurt by her. And now...now what?

"Mark, it's okay..." Doug held him, wiped off the tears, kissed him. Mark felt helpless, frozen. Then he realized Doug couldn't know what was going on.

"Jen...she's been in an accident..." He tried to remember what Carol had just said, tried to recount the damage that had been done. All he could say was, "She might die."

Doug pulled him tighter. "It's okay, Mark. We'll get through this. Go get dressed, I'll find Rachel."

Mark heard the words and he knew what they meant. But they didn't matter. The only thought he could make sense of was that his night with Doug had been spoiled. That he was useless to do anything to help Doug.

Dimly, Mark realized that something had to be done. He dressed, barely aware of what he was doing. He wasn't even sure if he was putting on his clothes or Doug's. He heard Doug saying something in the other room, something kiddish. He must have found Rachel. Then there were more serious words. Then there was silence for a few moments.

Doug walked in, dressed clumsily but dressed. "I talked to the baby-sitter. She'll take care of Rachel

as long as you need her to."

"Mrs. Freeble?" Mark was surprised at the question. He hadn't processed what Doug was saying and yet some part of his mind was clicking along. Doug nodded. Mrs. Freeble was a retired teacher who'd lived next to Mark and Jen for years. She was a kind woman in her early sixties. At least that made him feel better, but not much.



The ER was its usual state of activity, but somehow Mark saw it in a way he never had before. It seemed hectic and confused. He barely remembered the ride down from Doug's apartment. He remembered Doug's tender touches on the way down and the soft rain against the window.

Susan met him. "Mark, Jen's in stable condition. She isn't as bad as we thought. She only had a concussion, her right lung was partially collapsed but not severely. She's going to ICU right after surgery."

Mark grimaced at the word surgery, a word he'd used thousands of times without even thinking about it. Now it sounded so hard, so final. "Carol said something about...internal bleeding."

"Benton doesn't think it's serious. She's in surgery now. I can take you up..." Susan looked distracted. Dimly Mark saw Doug shaking his head.

"I'll take him up there. Thanks, Susan. Mark heard Doug's words and felt Doug leading him to the elevator. He felt Doug's side against his, knowing that it would probably make their relationship obvious but not caring.



"Poor Mark," Susan said to Carol.

"Yeah, he looks worse than December when she got hit up north."

"He does. That's odd. I mean this must be hard with the divorce and all." Susan shook her head. At least she knew Jen would survive. Unless something really bizarre happened.

"Even worse since he must have doing it with Doug." Susan was brought back to the present by Carol's comment, by Carol's grin. Her own look must have been priceless at that moment, speechless if nothing else. "Oh, come on, Susan. They're in here in each other's mixed up clothes. And trust me, I know Doug...there's something that only happens with him after sex..."

"Oh yeah, what?"

"I'm not telling you, especially if you don't believe me. Besides, look at the way they were hip to hip getting the elevator."

Susan tried not to be curious about the thing with Doug. She didn't want to admit it but Carol was probably right. Susan had seen the glances, the closeness lately. And she knew Mark had a history with men. Still actually voicing the idea, picturing it was hard. And yet she thought, it must be one hot sight seeing them together.



The waiting was terrible. It went on and on. Mark felt the shock wearing off, wondered at the intensity of his reaction. It was almost like waking from a dream. He lifted his head off of Doug's shoulder. Doug turned to him. "You okay?"

"Yeah...I think it was shock."

Doug looked doubtful. "Shock? Mark, I'm here, you don't need to cover anything up for me."

"I know, Doug, I know." Mark's hand instinctively reached up to stroke Doug's cheek. Mark almost expected Doug to react but he didn't. Maybe the hard days at work were over.

Then Benton was walking into the waiting room.

He zoned in on the two of them immediately. Dr. Hicks followed. Hicks said something to Benton and he left. She came over. "Dr. Greene, your wife is going to be fine. The bleeding was not severe." She smiled. "Knowing what I would be like in your place, I brought her chart. I'd want to see that more than hear someone talk. She's in recovery. She'll be in ICU for a few days...standard stuff, you know the drill."

Mark thanked her and looked at the chart. She was right, it wasn't too bad. Probably it had looked worse than it had actually been. He guessed Jen would be home within a week, maybe even less.



Mark sat in Doug's car. "So what did she say?" Doug asked.

"What did you expect her to say, right after surgery?" Mark couldn't help the anger. The humiliation was too much. He'd been called as her next of kin while she was on her way to bring him the divorce papers. Doug didn't say anything. "I'm sorry, Doug."

"It's okay." He felt Doug's hand stroke his arm in support.

"She...said...the divorce papers were...are..." Mark gestured with the envelope in his hand. Doug whistled but didn't say anything. Mark could imagine the thoughts in Doug's mind. He felt like screaming some of them himself, but he was glad Doug didn't say anything.



The morning wasn't easy. Mrs. Freeble called. Mark told her Jen would be home soon. She asked about sending Rachel to school. Mark said yes. Rachel wanted to talk to him. Of course, that was only fair.

"Hi, honey."

"Daddy, is Mommy going to be okay?"

"She's going to be fine, you can see her later if you want."

"I want to see her now."

"You're going to have to wait till after school, okay?" Rachel agreed, a little glumly but she agreed.



Then came the trial. Doug's big day to testify about the death of the kid who'd been gay. The kid who'd started their relationship with his death. A call to the hospital said Jen would be out of ICU by the end of the day. Mark didn't want to do anything but this was too big a day for Doug. He'd promised to be there at the trial and he would be. Besides it would be good for him, a beginning of his new life and an end to the old one.

"Mark, you don't have to come down with me, if you don't want to." Mark knew Doug was apprehensive about the whole gay-rights issue of the trial.

"Doug, I said I would be there for you," Mark hesitated. "Would you rather I not go?"

"I..I'm not sure...Mark, I want you there so bad but I'm scared." Doug looked at Mark in hopelessness. Mark felt equally hopeless.

The phone rang. Doug picked it up, handing it to Mark a moment later. "Hello?"

"Mark...I think that..."

"Jen?" Mark knew his voice was stone cold.

"Mark, I was thinking...I was pretty harsh in the divorce papers...especially after hearing how you came down here...I..."

"Jen, we'll discuss it later." Mark hung up the

phone. He pulled on his jacket, feeling a surge of energy as his anger at Jen turned into power when he thought of Doug's love, of his need for support. "Come on, Doug, we've got a life to start." Mark walked out the door, feeling an energy and sense of aliveness that he hadn't felt for months. Everything seemed suddenly clear.



Mark sat pensively in the courtroom. Doug testified with a calm assurance. Mark knew, though, that inside Doug was shaking. When the prosecution had finished with Doug, he sat down, heavily next to Mark. Mark couldn't help giving his lover's hand a squeeze of support. "You did good, Doug."

The next witness was from a gay support hotline. He testified about other people who had been attacked by their parents after coming out, including one couple who had been stalked by the one man's mother till she had caught them and killed them.

Doug was scared but he was also awed by the testimony. These men had risked their lives in order to be honest about their love. And how many other men and women had done the same in Chicago alone, not thinking about the rest of the world? He felt ashamed. But he felt ashamed in a different way than he had before. He felt ashamed of his fear that he and Mark might be discovered. Doug liked to think of himself as willing to take on any obstacles. Here was one he'd been to ashamed and afraid to take one, and yet it was so important. He realized that being seen, whether they were scared or not, was the only way he and Mark would ever be safe, ever be free.

The watershed of emotions was too much for Doug. They churned in him, confusing and yet enlightening as the trial went on. The prosecution rested its case before lunch. Then there was an hour recess. As the court room emptied, Doug just sat there. He knew Mark was worried. He knew he had to tell Mark how he was feeling, had to share these feelings, but he couldn't. Not yet. He was still too overwhelmed to understand and be coherent.

"Doug, are you okay?:"

"No...but I will be...I need some time to think." Mark just looked at him. "Mark, I'm sorry, but I need some fresh air and some time alone, just for now."

"Doug, I'm worried about you." Mark didn't need to say it, his eyes showed his concern so deeply that Doug almost broke down and cried, realizing that Mark cared this much.

"Mark...oh, Mark...I'll be okay. I'm not going to do something stupid. And I'll be back here this afternoon, but I need to take some time...okay?" Doug didn't have the strength to argue and he was grateful when Mark nodded slowly.

"All right, I'm going to check in on Jen, see what she wanted this morning."

"I'll meet you at work about five then."

"You sure, you'll be okay?"

"Yeah, but right now I need to do this alone." *And after today things'll be a whole lot different*, Doug thought, aware of the personal changes at work within him. He just didn't realize how much different they would be.



Mark was still worried as he left Doug in the courtroom. Testifying had been hard on him, trying to seem objective and not get angry when he thought about what had happened. But, Mark was certain that followed had had a far deeper impact on Doug. What scared him was the fact that he didn't know if it was a positive impact or not.

On his way out of the courthouse, Mark heard someone call his name. He turned, looking for the voice, wondering why it sounded so familiar. His heart stopped as he saw John following him down the steps.

"Mark, it was you I saw in there!" John flung his arms around Mark in the same breath.

"John...I...it ..um, how are you?" Mark couldn't help grinning. He hadn't seen John in so long. And yet all the old memories were coming back to him, all full of a nostalgia he'd never expected to feel for them.

"Not too bad, and you still straight? Still married?" Mark remembered the intense fights they'd had when Mark had told John that he wasn't gay, remembered the hurt and the anger and the desperate clinging to each other.

"Bi and divorcing." Mark was unsure of his words but he couldn't help smiling.

"I knew you couldn't be straight, I just knew. So any men after me?"

"Yeah, one, now."

"Oh really? Left the woman for a man?"

"Not exactly, but ...I've got to go. Can we talk again sometime?" Mark asked.

"Sure, what's your number?" Mark hesitated, about to give John Doug's number. Instead he gave him his work number.

"County General Hospital? So you did finish medical school after all?" Mark nodded. "So this isn't some **General Hospital** type romance is it?" John laughed before heading back into the court house.

Mark felt ambivalent about the meeting as he walked away. He really felt glad to have seen John and sorry to have not kept in contact, wondered how long they'd have to get reacquainted. He was too experienced a doctor to have not recognized the lesion on John's shoulder. It reminded him of the prejudice and hate against the gay community, the fear of people. He began to wonder if he'd be doing Doug a favor by exposing him to it.

Mark found himself debating that in his head on the way to work. Would it truly be better for him and Doug to come out? The hospital board would no doubt have problems with it. A gay (or bi) pediatrician would be a definite target for anti-gay demonstrators. So far as he knew, no one at work was prejudiced but still... And what about Jen or their families? How could he explain to Rachel?

The questions whirled in Mark's mind, making him dizzy and despairing. And now what did Jen want? He found her room number, she'd been moved from ICU early that morning. Susan said hi and he barely realized he'd seen her.

He walked into Jen's room, dreading the encounter. She was alone in the room. She was sitting up.

Mark! I didn't expect...after you hung up on me..."

"Yeah, well, I was in a hurry this morning and Doug needed some support."

Jen shook her head. "You're a good friend, Mark." She sighed and hesitated before speaking. "And, you were a good husband and father." Mark didn't say anything. He just looked at her, trying to see the woman he'd married and loved. "I was wrong about a lot. I was angry and tired and alone...Mark, I was so alone."

"So was I..." He whispered. At least she'd had Rachel, some form of their torn family.

"But you had friends...I didn't have anyone...and then Mike...Never mind, I have been unfair to you...I...wrote up a new draft of divorce papers while I was here this morning." She handed him a yellow legal pad. "Mark, I don't want it to end like this..."



The raging emotions didn't stop for Doug because of the walk he took. They didn't stop, they grew stronger. And yet, somewhere deep inside he felt a

desire he hadn't dared to believe might be possible swell. He considered telling everyone that he was in love with Mark. He wanted to do it so desperately. He didn't want to hide anymore. He'd been hiding too much for too long. But he was scared, more scared than he'd ever been. He felt almost like he had at that culvert, the night he'd been declared a hero. Scared but hopeful.

The rest of the afternoon wasn't any easier. He was tense as the trial continued. The defense, tried using a temporary insanity plea. There was too much evidence to prove that Smythe had killed his son. Doug knew he'd be called to testify. He'd been the one person who saw the man calmly asking if his son was dead yet. He was the one who'd heard that cold almost mocking tone. And now, two months later, more anger coursed through him than had that day. More anger and more determination.

In a way the call to the stand was a relief. He'd barely been aware of the trial. He was too caught up in his own emotions and reactions.

The first few questions were window dressing, attempts to divert attention from the point. When the attorney finally asked one that had real meaning Doug was at once relieved, angry, and shocked at his own reaction.

"Dr. Ross, isn't it true that even you, a trained and competent physician were bothered by Jason Smythe's admission of his sexuality?" Doug heard the prosecutor object. "I'll rephrase...Dr. Ross, your reaction to Jason's admission was to request someone from another department. Speculation could be made that it was because you didn't feel able to handle the situation. If that is true, how could someone like my client be expected to deal with this in a rational matter?"

"I requested a psychiatric evaluation because I am not qualified to deal with this sort of situation."

"How fortunate that you were able to do so."

"Listen, if you are implying that I have a problem with gay people or gay youth, you could not be

more mistaken." Doug felt the anger reaching a breaking point, but he wasn't sure what would happen if he reached that point.

"And, how can you prove such a statement, Dr. Ross?"

Doug felt his eyes narrow, felt a surge of adrenaline rush through him as the next words came from his lips. "You want to know...All right...I am bisexual. I grew up feeling hate, anger, fear and shame because of it and I was still attracted to women as well as men. I can only imagine how hard it must have been for Jason. And I do not have the psychological training to deal with that deep an emotional trauma."

Doug slumped back into the witness chair, shocked and elated and exhausted by what he'd just said. There was silence for a moment. Doug remembered hearing Jen once say that a lawyer never asks a question they don't already know the answer to...well this guy had just done the opposite.



Mark sat pensively in Jeneane's office, glad she'd been able to squeeze him in. She was reading the papers Jen had drawn up, looking serious. As she read the last page, she lifted her reading glasses off her ebony face, and smiled.

"Mark, sign these before she can change her mind."

"You mean..."

"It's not a trick, she's willing to give you joint custody, full when school is out. Not to mention all the money she was demanding for your medical school loans that she paid. All in all, there's nothing to sneeze at, it's better than anything we could've hoped to get."

"Can you have them typed up?"

"They'll be done by the end of the day. Get one of the hospital notaries to her room and get them

signed before she changes her mind." Mark nodded and shook Jeneane's hand stunned.



Jeneane had the papers typed up within an hour, much to Mark's surprise, but then this was a day of surprises. And it wasn't over yet. As Mark rode in the cab to County General, hoping to make it before all the notaries there went home, he wondered how Doug was doing. Doug had been so shaken that Mark was truly worried. *I shouldn't have left him*, he thought.

Jen skimmed the papers before the notary arrived at her room. "Mark, can we try to be friends from now on?" she asked.

Mark knew she was sincere, but he was still too hurt, still too worried about Doug. "We'll see, Jen. It's going to take time."

She nodded. "I know...I...understand." She probably didn't, but Mark didn't care right now. It was almost five o'clock. The trial would be ending for the day. He wanted to be there for Doug.

The notary came in, they signed and their marriage was over. It seemed too simple. Mark agreed to bring the papers downtown tomorrow to be filed. He heard Jen's surprised gasp as he was about to leave the room. He looked back. She was pointing at the television. She quickly turned the sound up.

"You may all remember this footage about three months ago when Dr. Doug Ross of County General Hospital saved the life of a young boy trapped in a drain culvert." The footage from that night showed on the screen for a moment. "Today the same Dr. Ross, stunned all of us when he said the following during the trial of Nathan Smythe, who is accused of murdering his son after the boy revealed he was gay."

"I am bisexual. I grew up feeling hate, anger, fear and shame because of it and I was still attracted to women as well as men. I can only imagine how

hard it must have been for Jason. And I do not have the psychological training to deal with that deep an emotional trauma." Mark stood in shock, feeling all the blood drain from his face. He knew Jen was just as surprised, but he couldn't react to it, to anything.

"Our Amanda Weaver had a moment to speak with Dr. Ross after the defense rested their case." The screen showed a hurried interview.

"Dr. Ross, you seemed as surprised as everyone else by your answer earlier, were you? And why did you make such an admission?"

Doug answered with a tone in his voice that Mark had never heard before, something part joy, part pride. "Well, I certainly didn't intend to come out, as it were but...Something had to be said. People have to learn to accept gay and bisexual people. And if by being someone that's been a role model, I can do that, even a little, then I have to."

"You said that you remembered feeling fear anger and shame as a child because of your attraction to other men, would you elaborate?"

"It was like knowing you're different but not knowing how. Not being sure what to do because its something nobody talks about."

"Do you think it would make a difference if people did talk about it?"

"Yes, a lot. There would be a lot less teen suicides. And the Nathan Smythes of the world wouldn't be able to claim ignorance."

"Okay, Dr. Ross, we have time for one more question. There are a number of people who would like to have a relationship with you after your heroic efforts a few months ago. Are you available or are you seeing a man or woman?" Doug seemed to enjoy the question. Mark couldn't understand that. If he wasn't so shocked, he knew he'd be outraged.

"Yes, there is someone. A man that I care very much about."

Mark felt his legs giving out, barely able to catch himself against the wall before he fell. He was more in shock than he'd been the night before. Had it only been last night? He couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

"Mark, are you okay?" Jen was asking.

"I...I'm just surprised," he gasped.

"Me too...I never would've...did you know?"

Mark almost ran in fear but the divorce papers were signed. She couldn't do anything. Still Mark didn't want to have this conversation. Not yet. "I gotta go."



Mark was still barely able to walk as the elevator doors opened. *Work*, work will help, he thought, give me something to concentrate on. That was what he thought until he walked into the ER.

"So Mark, how long has this been going on?" Carol stood there smiling. Susan was there too, so was Carter. And Weaver.

"Mark, if this is true, I think we need to discuss how it's going to affect interpersonal relations here and..." Mark felt his knees giving out, felt himself falling but the blackness took over before he hit the ground.



Mark woke slowly, not sure where he was or what was going on. For a moment he rolled over, reaching for Doug's body. Then he remembered. He rolled onto his back. *Oh God, how did they know?* They all knew.

"Mark?" Doug's voice was so gentle, as was his hand against Mark's cheek. Mark tensed once. Then he remembered, everyone knew. Did that make it safe?

"Doug...does everyone know?"

Doug nodded in the dimmed room. "They knew before I even walked in. Are you okay?"

"I'm still...you were...I...."

"I don't know but once I said it, I felt so good. Afraid about what was going to happen next, but I felt better than I can ever remember feeling before. I hope...I hope I didn't hurt you." Doug looked scared that Mark might turn away.

"Doug, how many times do I have to say that I'm not going anywhere?" Mark sat up, leaning over to kiss Doug. He had only meant to brush their lips together but he couldn't. He pulled Doug close, kissing him hard, not wanting to stop. Mark didn't care who saw them, who knew about them. It didn't matter now, Doug felt the same way. Finally they could be together all the time.

"We've still got a lot of work to do." Doug gasped when they broke apart.

"Yeah, but nothing's going to stop us. And we've got time." And then they were kissing again, knowing that their love was sure now, knowing that nothing could stop it.



CANDLE FLAMES

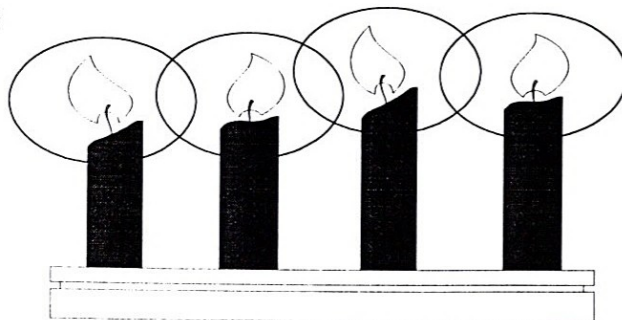
**A box contains your body,
dead, soon gone, but never forgotten.
I'm unable to forget.
In truth, I don't want to, Sonny.**

**I'll light another candle.
Hundreds of people have marched in and out of this chapel.
I wait in the shadows, watch in the corners,
guard during this time that you are vulnerable.**

**No one knows how I...feel,
no one ever will. None but...you.
I never said, spoke of these feelings.
But when our eyes met and our minds touched,
a shock traveled around the world to center in each other.**

**I'll light another candle. It's growing late.
Soon. Soon you must go. Forever.
I feel a warmth from the flames.
There are so many, light must banish this darkness,
another, yet another flares into a warm glow and finally
I am alone with you.
But there is nothing else to say,
or do, but put out the candles and leave....**

— R. HOOD



THE BED



By Rudy

Hercules sighed happily and dove into the bed, rolling onto his back and stretching luxuriantly. *A bed.* He hadn't slept in a bed for months and this one was huge and soft, with thick bedclothes and fluffy pillows. A graceful olive tree rustled its silvery leaves in the window opposite; a small fire crackled merrily in its grate to ward off the chill of the spring night. The temptation to give in to sleep immediately was almost overwhelming, yet . . .

He hopped up, stripping off his boots and clothes and folding them into the chest at the foot of the bed. Then, he pulled back the covers and crawled in, cradling his head on his arms as he gazed out the window. *Ah, that's better.* He turned as the door opened to admit a small, muscular figure topped by a wild thatch of golden hair. He laughed at the bemused expression on Iolaus' face as he saw the room.

"A bed? An actual bed?" Iolaus flashed a blinding smile and placed the jug of wine on the floor. Dumping his sword and pack, he surveyed the room as Hercules had done. "A fire? A window? A **bed**? With pillows, and covers, and..." His voice trailed off and he stared at Hercules.

"Hey, hand over the wine!"

Iolaus shook himself and complied with Hercules' laughing request, then echoed his friend's earlier actions by speedily divesting himself of his

clothing and crawling into the bed.

"This is too good. Ahhh. Let me have a swallow of that wine, would you?"

The two passed the bottle back and forth in companionable silence, enjoying the unaccustomed luxury. Hercules' eyelids were beginning to droop when Iolaus sighed beside him and snuggled down into the pillow, already asleep.

Hercules watched him for a moment, enjoying the sight of the peaceful expression on his friend's face. It had been only a week since Iolaus had died in Hercules' arms — a week. He had met Hades' conditions for returning Iolaus' life, but . . . Iolaus **had** died. Three times, he'd lost his friend to death — three times, he'd been granted a reprieve, and still he still he lacked the courage to . . .

He pushed the thoughts from his mind and blew out the lamp, surrendering to the darkness and following the golden hunter into the realms of dreams.

He was holding Iolaus helplessly, watching the life drain from his battered body. He screamed his denial to the sky, but no amount of screaming could bring animation back to the cold, unresponsive form. Tears streaming down his cheeks, Hercules clutched his friend to his breast, sobbing out his desolation.

"Iolaus. Please, no."

"Sshhh, Herc, it's okay. I'm right here. Wake up."

Hercules opened his eyes to see Iolaus bending over him in the soft moonlight, one hand resting on Hercules' shoulder. Relief and joy at seeing the life glowing in those beloved features flooded over Hercules' nightmare-shrouded mind.

"Iolaus. Gods, you're alive."

He pulled Iolaus into his arms, burying his face in the sun-kissed hair. Iolaus returned the embrace, wrapping his arms around his friend's waist and burrowing his face into the crook of the demigod's neck and shoulder. Hercules almost moaned with delight at the sensation of the hunter's body nestled against his own, and his natural reaction was embarrassingly immediate.

That's what happens when you deny what you want for too long, Hercules thought to himself wryly; *you can't even control yourself when he tries to offer you innocent comfort.* He tried to extricate himself from Iolaus' embrace before his friend realized his condition, but, even as he began easing away, Iolaus' thigh brushed against Hercules' burgeoning erection. Both men froze.

"Iolaus, I'm sorry. Don't worry." Hercules sighed loudly and tried again to pull out of the embrace.

"Why?" Iolaus' voice was soft, his clear eyes met Hercules' puzzled gaze unflinchingly.

"Why what?"

"Why are you sorry?"

Hercules stared at Iolaus without speaking. His friend's strong arms still clasped his waist; one muscular leg still rested against his erection. The scent of Iolaus' skin and hair rose around Hercules like a mist, and his words and their implications rang through the room.

Iolaus rescued Hercules from his scattered thoughts by raising his lips for a kiss. A kiss which was willingly given, slow, sure, and tender. Then a sudden blaze of passion, and Iolaus' tongue was plundering Hercules' mouth, his small hands clutching at Hercules' buttocks. Hercules shook with arousal, threading his hands through the mane of golden hair and pushing, pushing Iolaus and his clever tongue down, down . . .

Hercules moaned and sat up abruptly. Iolaus slept next to him, undisturbed, curled away to face the fire. His breath sounded softly in the moon-silvered room. Hercules gulped the night air for a few moments, trying to clear his head. The erection which had haunted his dreams throbbed between his legs the lavender scent of Iolaus' hair still hung about him, but in reality this time.

He lay back slowly, the dream clinging to him like a cobweb of desire. The temptation to reach down and pleasure himself to satiation was almost overwhelming, but he knew that this was not an option. If Iolaus were to wake up, look over, and see....

Gods, he was far gone. He closed his eyes and locked his hands behind his head, where they'd stay out of mischief. He forced himself to relax, guiltily allowing himself to wallow in the sound of Iolaus' breathing, in the heat which emanated from the sleeping man. Gradually, he relaxed into sleep, deep and intense.



"Herc. Come on, Herc, wake up!"

Hercules groaned and opened his eyes to find Iolaus standing over him, fully clothed, his damp hair proof that he'd been awake for some time.

"I've already been downstairs; you've gotta get up! They've got lamb sausages, tomatoes, cheese, fresh bread, and the best brown ale you've ever tasted!" Iolaus grabbed the covers, intending to pull them off of Hercules' body, but the demigod was

painfully aware that he was once again erect, thanks to a series of erotic dreams starring the dear friend who stood staring down at him impatiently, and he hung onto the sheet with all of his considerable strength.

"Sounds to me like you've already tasted it," Hercules grumbled.

"Hey, would I ask my friend to try ale that I hadn't already tested?" Iolaus' blue eyes laughed down at him.

"Right. Tell you what; why don't you go test a little more; I'll clean up and meet you there."

Iolaus giggled and agreed, gone in a leather-clad blur before Hercules could even sit up. He threw the covers off his overheated body and glared at the olive tree.

"What are you staring at? If you were me, you'd want him, too. I just wish . . . ah, what am I doing? You're a tree." Hercules hopped out of bed and relieved himself in the chamber pot, then cleaned up using the water on the table under the window. It was fresh; Iolaus must have brought more up after he'd washed. Hercules snorted to himself. He was so overcome with lust that he would have probably been hard all day if he had had to use the water into which Iolaus had dipped his hands, splashing deep handfuls of water over himself. The crystal droplets trickling down his chest to be trapped, sparkling, in the thick golden patch of hair curling around . . .

Hercules shook himself impatiently and dressed quickly.

"I've really gotta get laid," he mumbled to himself as he headed down the stairs.

The pretty barmaid had her dark head bent close to Iolaus' blond one as Hercules entered the room, her hand resting lightly on his atop his mug of ale. Hercules bit back the unreasonable surge of jealousy that washed through him at the sight and

settled himself next to Iolaus. He felt a guilty rush of satisfaction when the woman blushed and stammered in response to his patented smile and spilled a bit of ale while trying to serve him. He felt doubly awful when Iolaus' bright face fell a bit at her change of heart, and bent his every effort to bring the smile back to his friend's expressive eyes.

It was too easy. Iolaus glowed from within, his face lighting with happiness as they joked and planned. The breakfast was perfect, and the ale strong. They left the inn side by side, walking slowly to the sea. There they settled and spent the best part of the day playing in the waves, then lolling in the sun, skins salty and flushed by the warmth. They fought good-naturedly about whose turn it was to dress and head to the inn for more ale, but were silent for the most part. Iolaus was unusually quiet, but seemed happy, so Hercules left him in peace.

His own thoughts alternated between simple contentment and roiling confusion. He wanted Iolaus as a lover, and he loved Iolaus as a friend. How long could he keep pretending, how long could he hide his feelings from his hyper-perceptive companion — and, should he be hiding them? Well, it didn't matter what he **should** do; in this instance, he was a confirmed coward. Iolaus never seemed upset by the almost constant sexual overtures which he received from men, but he never took any of those men up on their salacious offers, either. Hercules didn't particularly want to join the list of men who'd badgered the golden warrior with unwanted advances. He couldn't bear the thought of jeopardizing the easiness of their deep friendship, the trust which enabled them to lie like this, side by side in the sun, their nakedness a matter of unconcern. The trust which had made it possible for Iolaus to crawl into the bed beside Hercules the night before and snuggle down to sleep.

That damned bed. Iolaus in the damned bed.

Hercules rose to his feet and pulled his pants on,

moving quickly to get ahead of his own thoughts before they proved an embarrassment.

"My turn." He headed to town, careful not to look back at the bronzed form half-dozing in the salt-scented sunlight.



The next morning dawned bright and beautiful, and Hercules headed off at Iolaus' side, hugely grateful to be leaving the clean, fresh room and deep, soft bed behind. He'd rarely slept as poorly as he had the night before. From the moment Iolaus, red-brown from his day in the sun, his hair a salty nimbus around his handsome face, had slipped under the covers beside him, Hercules had been lost. He'd turned away from Iolaus at once, curling up and feigning sleep until he was sure that Iolaus was nestled into dreams again. He'd finally fallen asleep himself, but his dreams had awakened him in the middle of the night, sweating and moaning. He spent the rest of the night sitting in the window ledge, conferring silently with the olive tree and stealing occasional guilty glances at Iolaus' moon-washed face.



They traveled quickly, and by midafternoon were ready to camp. They found the perfect spot, a ring of trees by a clear, secluded lake, and wordlessly readied their Spartan camp. They settled back to rest, and Hercules allowed the peace of the spot to still his troubled spirit. Iolaus was his friend, and that was enough.

Iolaus, however, was cloaked in an air of gravity which contrasted sharply with his usual wild exuberance, and Hercules remembered that he'd been uncharacteristically silent during the previous day. After nearly an hour of watching him leaning against a rock, staring moodily up at the trees, Hercules broke.

"Iolaus? Is something bothering you?"

"No. Yes. I just...I've just been thinking."

"This is serious," Hercules joked.

Iolaus flashed him a look, but subsided into silence again.

After a few minutes, Hercules prompted, hopefully, "Thinking about what?"

Iolaus fixed his deep blue gaze on his friend's concerned face. His questioning eyes seemed to burn into Hercules' soul.

"Why were you so uneasy at the inn? You acted like you were sharing the bed with a leper; last night you spent half of the time sitting in the window. What did I do?"

Hercules stared at him, stunned. Coward or not, it looked as though the time for the truth had come, because what he saw in his friend's eyes was pain — a sense of betrayal and confusion. He opened his mouth to speak, but Iolaus continued.

"Is it because I was, well, you know, aroused that first night? I tried to hide it. I thought I *had*, until... Because I wouldn't force myself on you, you know." Iolaus, oblivious to the dawning shock in his friend's face, gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I couldn't, even if I would. You must have known for a long time how I feel about you. Have I ever done anything to make you feel like you couldn't trust me?"

Hercules gaped at Iolaus' intent face. He felt as though the world had just tilted, as though a familiar landmark had suddenly transformed itself into something completely foreign. He felt laughter bubbling up inside him and knew that he couldn't contain it. It burst from him — deep, relieved belly-laugh that shortly had him rolling on the ground. Iolaus, his face pale with hurt, and anger, jumped to his feet and stared down at Hercules for a moment before turning to leave the camp.

Hercules managed to gain enough control to lurch to his feet and make a grab at Iolaus, catching up to him in a few steps and spinning him, placing them face to face. His heart twisted as he saw the tears in Iolaus' eyes.

"Iolaus, you don't understand. I'm not laughing at you; I'm — "

Iolaus angrily shrugged Hercules' hands off his shoulders.

"Who else is here? Let me go, Herc. Just let me go."

"No. Not until you hear what I have to say."

"Your laughter said it all."

Iolaus turned blindly away, moving to stand by the lake, with his back to Hercules. The demigod followed, giggles still threatening to erupt despite his empathy for the pain in Iolaus' transparent face. He placed his hands on the tense, muscular shoulders, gazing down at the silken, waving hair, unable to allow himself to believe that what he'd just heard could possibly be true. Iolaus shrugged away from his touch once again, but Hercules pulled him around.

He looked down into the pain-filled, angry face — those beloved features; the lean, dimpled cheeks, the thin well-shaped lips. That cocky, damned nose, and those bewildered blue eyes. He bent his head, placing his mouth against Iolaus', and held his breath as he waited for his friend's response.

Iolaus fired beneath his hands and mouth almost immediately; it was apparent that he'd been bottling up his desire for at least as long as Hercules had. His mouth opened readily, and his nimble tongue met Hercules' teasingly, a flick of fire in his mouth. One hand ran through Hercules' honey-brown hair to cradle the back of his head; the other flattened against his back, pulling him closer.

Hercules lost himself in the kiss, lifting Iolaus from the ground, devouring that sweet mouth. Iolaus wrapped his legs around Hercules' waist; then disaster struck. Mouths still locked together, they fell backward into the lake.

Hercules sat up with alacrity, as Iolaus surfaced next to him, spitting icy water.

"Typical," Iolaus commented, sourly.

Iolaus looked wonderful wet, Hercules decided. He reached out and pulled Iolaus into his arms for another kiss. He tasted wonderful, too.

"Uh, Herc?"

"Mmmm hmmm?" Hercules answered, politely murmuring his response directly into Iolaus' ear, accompanying his dazzling discourse with a few nibbles.

"You remember that advice you gave me, about jumping into cold water? Well, it works."

Hercules stared at him dreamily for a moment, before Iolaus' meaning became clear. He clutched Iolaus against him and dragged them both out of the water, only falling back in twice. Iolaus squirmed out of his grasp and ran up to the camp, grabbing his blanket and turning to rub Hercules' arms and chest vigorously, apparently quite eager to restore the flow of blood to the demigod's extremities.

Hercules gently pulled the blanket away from Iolaus and towed his own hair quickly, then did the same for Iolaus.

"Let's just get these wet clothes off of you, shall we?" he murmured, as he pulled the sodden vest away from Iolaus' chest, letting it drop at their feet. He knelt, removing Iolaus' boots, then the leather belts. He took his time opening the hunter's codpiece; Iolaus' lips were practically blue by the time Hercules had dropped the leather pants over the vest, and turned his attention back to the

shivering skin he'd revealed.

Still kneeling, he grabbed the blanket and dried Iolaus, tenderly. He took his time over this, as well, and the hunter's shivering became trembling as Hercules kissed his way across the hard curves of Iolaus' chest, sampling each dark, delicate nipple in turn, then moving gradually down the muscular torso to nuzzle hotly across his hard abdomen. He looked up, to find Iolaus staring at him raptly, biting his lip to suppress his moans. Hercules reached up to place a caressing finger over Iolaus' mouth.

"You can scream if you want to; we're the only ones around."

"Make me." Iolaus grinned shakily, swirling his tongue around the demigod's finger, then biting the tip with a snarl.

A challenge. Hercules loved a challenge.

He stood and threw his own blanket on the level spot before the fire pit, and freed himself of his sodden clothing as quickly as wet leather and cotton would allow. He knelt on the blanket and beckoned to Iolaus, who smiled hotly, gliding over to stand before Hercules once again. Hercules' hands slid over the hunter's silken skin, then he took Iolaus' stiffening shaft into his mouth in one smooth motion, and the smaller man gasped.

Hercules occupied one hand with steadying the base of the mortal's turgid length, while his other wandered to tease at Iolaus' nipples, to run down the curve of his buttocks, and to caress his tight, musky scrotum. As Iolaus began moaning urgently, and the cock in his mouth grew hotter and thicker, Hercules ran his hand down the dark crevice behind Iolaus' balls and teased his finger across the hunter's anus a few times, before slipping it inside. He began swallowing around Iolaus' swollen shaft, and Iolaus shouted, his body tightening around Hercules' thrusting finger. When the muscles clamped on his finger slackened, Hercules introduced a second finger and increased

the pace. He felt the tremors shuddering through Iolaus' muscular frame, felt the cock in his mouth begin to jump. Iolaus clutched Hercules' shoulders for support, and the demigod pumped the hunter's shaft firmly while sucking on the velvet head, thrusting mightily into Iolaus' hot body with his fingers. He swallowed Iolaus' seed as it streamed into his mouth, his mind reeling as he felt the tightening of the anal muscles around his fingers. Iolaus was shouting Hercules' name, the sound catching in the air like a golden arrow.

Hercules pulled his mouth away, capturing the last of Iolaus' seed in his hand and pulling him to the blanket. Iolaus turned onto his knees, spreading his legs and looking back at Hercules with such a blaze of lust that Hercules' whole body shook with need. He slid his fluid-covered fingers into Iolaus, thrusting easily until Iolaus began pushing back against the invading digits. Removing them, he replaced them with his aching cock before Iolaus could even protest the loss of the tantalizing pressure.

Slowly, he pushed into the welcoming warmth, almost losing control as the muscles tightened convulsively around him. He leaned forward over Iolaus' back, burying his face in the damp, golden hair, nuzzling at his neck. Iolaus turned his head to capture his lips urgently and pushed back against the shaft impaling him. Hercules moaned into that sweet mouth as he slid the rest of the way into Iolaus' body. He fought the impulse to pound mindlessly into the compact warrior, instead concentrating on setting a rhythm that soon had them both trembling. He balanced his weight by bracing one arm against the ground; the height discrepancy between him and his mortal lover was proving to be a bit of a challenge. The other hand reached around Iolaus' waist, to wrap eagerly around his stirring shaft.

Before long, though, Hercules gave himself over to sensation, his careful rhythm quickening, and he stroked the hunter's renewed erection in time with his increasingly deep thrusts, shaking and shouting his love, his need, into the warm spring air. Iolaus

was gasping hoarsely, thrusting back against Hercules with each beat, an equal in this battle of desire. Finally, the pleasure overcame Iolaus; he pushed mindlessly into Hercules' fist as his seed spattered up onto his chest. Hercules could stand it no longer; he emptied himself into Iolaus, driven past endurance by the convulsions of his lover's body beneath and around him. An endless, breathless moment, beyond thought. They were one.

Iolaus moaned at the abandonment when, at length, Hercules slid from his body, but his moans were stilled by his lover's mouth as the demigod pulled him into a shaking, eager embrace.

"I love you, Iolaus."

Iolaus laughed, a sparkling shower of glee.

"Yeah? Well, I love you too."

He smiled mischievously up into Hercules' glowing face, then grimaced. He reached under the blanket and pulled out a small rock, tossing it away.

"Why couldn't we have done this when we had a bed?"





SHADOWED HEART

I led you away from the magnificent, vile being lying there on the floor.

You were stunned — hurt — crushed
and it was my fault.

You said so, I agree,
but, Vince, my friend...my might-be lover,
you have no idea how much I wanted to save him...for you.

To see you smile,
your eyes light with excitement,
flash in the sun of reality with joy.

When that happens, I feel a
place somewhere in my chest
that warms, just slightly, but with a tugging remembrance of years
gone past from a time I'd rather not think about
when someone...loved me and I didn't realize just how
badly I might need that someday.

I need you, Vince,
desire you as well,
and you spit hate into my face showing your love for him.

I know you don't want me dead,
that's fear showing,
and for the first time in years I have hope
for there may be a chance to step out of the shadows
and find that I love once again....

— R flood

Secrets of Darkened Hearts

by Tenaya

(Takes place around the time of 'Till Death')

The Seine was flooding again. A series of heavy winter storms had more than saturated the farmlands that surrounded the headwaters of the historic river. As each of the small tributaries crested and poured its swollen contents into the Seine, the river itself grew brown and turbulent. A mass of water and debris headed for Paris and was forced to squeeze through the tall, walled embankments of the ancient city, causing the flood waters to rise even quicker. These precautions were not enough, and the murky water overflowed and sought to drown anything within its eager reach.

Methos watched disgustedly as the water seethed into the basement of the bookstore that he managed for the Watchers. Thanks to the flooding of the month before, he was better prepared this time. In only an hour, he had moved his most valuable books upstairs and relocated the rest to the tops of the tallest bookshelves. Satisfied with their safety, he decided to head for the quay where Duncan kept his barge tied up. Perhaps the Highlander would need a hand with his boat.

The weather was miserable; near freezing, it was pouring rain and the icy sleet sliced at any exposed skin. Methos turned up his collar and hurried to the street that turned off to curve down

to the quayside. When he saw the river, his heart sank. Duncan stood tensely on the bridge of the barge, the motor loud but still only idling as he tried to ready the craft while attempting to hold the rudder steady. The river had already overflowed the pavement of the quay and the powerful current caught at the barge, causing it to twist at its submerged moorings. If the boat wasn't freed soon, it would be disastrous.

Realizing he was soon going to be a lot wetter than he already was, Methos cursed and waded into the thigh-deep freezing water. He did not even attempt to call out until he knew MacLeod had felt his approach.

"What can I do?" he shouted, the wind snatching away his words as soon as they left his mouth.

Duncan, his dark good looks nearly hidden beneath a heavy peacoat, looked over at him, momentarily surprised. "Untie the moorings — the stern's first," he yelled, motioning at the downstream tie-off in case Methos could not hear all his words.

Methos sloshed through the dark water until he neared where the taut rope disappeared. Bending over, he felt about carefully and was engulfed to

his armpits in the cold, swift current. Numb fingers worked at the line and he finally freed it. Tossing the rope onto the ship, he turned against the torrent to get to the bow line. He stumbled as something submerged knocked into his shin. As he fell to one knee, his overcoat caught the current and pulled him over. He was swept tumbling and skidding through the powerful water until he was slammed unexpectedly against a bolted-down park bench. Thoroughly drenched and coughing out a portion of the river, he pulled himself upright and held on until he got his bearings.

"Adam!"

He wiped the water from his eyes and saw that MacLeod had abandoned the barge's wheel and was now standing on the stern, life preserver and rope in hand. He called to Methos again and gestured, wordlessly asking if he wanted the flotation device thrown to him.

Methos waved him off and got to his feet. Determinedly, he fought his way upstream towards the only thing that kept the barge tethered to its now dangerous moorings. In that short amount of time, the river had risen enough that as Methos reached in to untie the rope, the chop of the water was splashing over his head. It was an impossible job and he reverted to his secondary plan. He stood up, removed his sword and sawed determinedly at the thick line. Within five cuts, the razor-sharp edge had severed the rope.

Duncan felt the boat swing free and he eased the throttle forward. He steered the barge back towards its former berth, too well aware that Methos was now surrounded by a flood of freezing water. It was a long way back to dry land and he doubted Methos could make it safely through the treacherous current.

Tying off the boat's wheel, he jumped from the bridge and ran forward. The barge was still the same level above the water, but now there was no walkway up to it. There was no way a soaked

and freezing man would be able to board the barge by himself. Duncan yelled for his friend and then he lay down on the deck and swung his arm over the side. Methos waded forward and waited for the barge to come within range. He grabbed hold of MacLeod's arm and pulled himself up until his other hand caught the edge of the deck. Duncan shifted his hold on Methos to his other hand and then reached down and grasped Methos' belt. With a heave, he dragged the drenched Immortal onto the deck.

"Come on," he shouted. "We have to go upstream to a boat yard. I know where there is safe docking." As Duncan ran back and took the wheel, Methos went forward to huddle near the prow, offering guidance away from the flood-borne hazards of trees and other debris.

An hour later, they reached the protected enclosure and secured the craft. Having done all they could for the vessel, they headed inside. MacLeod, concerned that the freezing, wet conditions might have Methos well into hypothermia, made sure the shivering Immortal preceded him down the steps. As they entered the galley area, he put his hand on Methos' arm to stop him.

"Give me your clothes. I've a small washer/dryer unit in the corner here."

"That's a relief. I've been smelling wet dog since I've been on board. Trouble is, you don't have one, do you, MacLeod?" he said, his teeth chattering with the effects of the cold. He removed his sword and laid it on the counter. Shrugging off his overcoat, he threw it in the sink. Sweater, shirt, and t-shirt followed.

MacLeod was busying himself with the oven. He opened the door and turned. "Hey, Fido, fetch me your shoes, then head to the shower."

"Smart-ass. Try not to ruin them, all right?" he said, tossing them one at a time to the Highlander. His trousers landed with a wet plop on his other

clothes. Nude, he walked slowly, joints stiff from the cold, towards the head and its shower. "Please let there be hot water," he prayed aloud.

MacLeod paused to admire the view, even if a majority of the skin was decidedly blue. Since it would soon be dark outside, there would be no easy way to safely leave the barge tonight; apparently Methos and he would have to find their own ways to amuse themselves and pass the time. MacLeod smiled.

When Methos emerged twenty minutes later, his skin glowed a healthy, vibrant pink that contrasted nicely with the thick white towel he was wrapping about his narrow hips. Padding into the galley, he gave a lopsided grin and vigorously tousled his short, wet hair. "This barge has more hot water than most country inns," he complimented MacLeod.

"Yeah, well, if you've used it all up, I'll take it outta your hide," MacLeod promised as he picked up his robe and edged past Methos.

The ancient Immortal's eyes sparkled impishly. "You really should have spoken up earlier, you know."

MacLeod didn't even break his stride. "Funny. Ha ha," he tossed sarcastically over his shoulder.

Relieved to finally be warm and dry, Methos busied himself by inspecting his shoes and preparing a meal of sorts. The barge had warmed up considerably and rather than put on clothes, he simply snagged one of the extra blankets to wrap cloak-like around himself. When he heard the shower stop, he piled two plates with buttered bread, cheese, and cut fruit, and transferred them and two bowls of soup to the table behind the couch. He had turned to go back for the wine when his eye was caught by MacLeod re-entering the room. He had pulled his robe on and was adjusting it about his shoulders, causing the garment to flare open and closed, revealing the Highlander's tanned, muscular, and nude body.

Methos stared openly. "Is that the new semaphore signal for 'I'm available for sex'?"

MacLeod smiled. "Yeah," he agreed. "I'm supposed to let the navy know how effective it is." He flashed Methos a few more times. "Whaddya think?"

Methos considered the question thoughtfully. "Well, it should get the attention of any interested parties," he said with a shrug and walked back into the galley for the wine.

MacLeod followed. When Methos turned about, he found he was trapped against the counter.

"I'm interested in the reaction from one party in particular," MacLeod said, his voice low and seductive.

"Really?" Methos asked, pretending innocence. "And who would that be?"

MacLeod wrapped his arms about Methos and leaned in for a soft, lingering kiss. "I think you know who."

Methos smiled. "You're pretty confident."

"You can't get away; there's no way off this barge until morning." He nuzzled into an ear and leaned forward to kiss the nape of Methos' neck.

The ancient Immortal tilted his head to allow better access. "Captain MacLeod has a captive," he mused. "Willing or un?"

MacLeod stilled and shifted until he could look Methos in the eye. "Maybe not so much a captive," he ventured tentatively. "How about a cabin boy? Rescued...off a pirate ship..."

Methos' face was carefully expressionless. "Poor lad. Saved from a fate worse than death?"

MacLeod's hands rubbed at the blanket-wrapped back, his eyes going hooded. "Maybe..."

"He was probably very hungry, being on a pirate ship and all."

"Ravenous." MacLeod closed the space between them and claimed Methos' mouth in a kiss that left no doubt as to who exactly the ravenous one was.

When the kiss ended, Methos looked amused. "All right, Highlander. You can have your wicked way with me, but let's move our base of operations over to the couch."

Duncan entwined his fingers with his lover's and drew him alongside as they walked to the couch. When they were standing in front of it, he reached out to take Methos in his arms again, but was surprised when Methos pushed him away, causing him to fall back on the cushions. He sat there looking puzzled until Methos placed one knee next to Duncan's hip, purposely positioning it on top of the robe's material. Staring the Highlander boldly in the eye, he reached down and flicked the robe apart at the waist, exposing Duncan's powerful thighs, a dark nest of hair, and the thick cock that snuggled there. His second knee followed suit on Duncan's other side and Methos settled on MacLeod's lap with a sigh, effectively using his weight on the robe to pin Duncan beneath him.

"It's going to be a looong night, MacLeod," he said, his voice suddenly much deeper. "What do you say we explore the delights of pacing?"

Using both hands, Methos slowly pushed Duncan's robe open, letting his fingers and palms glide across the warm contours of the broad, muscled chest. He opened his blanket and extended it to encompass Duncan, including both of them within its folds. Inching closer, he let the skin of his scrotum and ass rub sensuously over MacLeod's lap. Unable to resist, he let his hands seek out the brawny shoulders again and he squeezed the hard muscles, enjoying the feel of their solid nature and bulk.

Leaning close, he could feel the body heat between them building, their chests just an inch or two apart. The rising warmth carried the tantalizing smell of expensive soap, MacLeod's aftershave, and the warm musk of MacLeod himself — a scent that never failed to remind Methos of the wilds of a highland moor.

MacLeod's hands slid up Methos' hard thighs and blindly caressed the lean hips and flanks, tracing muscle definitions around to include the small of Methos' back. He flexed his arms, trying to pull the ancient closer yet, wanting full body contact.

"Patience," Methos murmured, then claimed Duncan's mouth in a deep, passionate kiss. He brought up one hand to cradle the Highlander's head, steadying him while he lengthened the kiss, showing no indication that he would be ending it any time soon.

Finally, MacLeod understood and he brought his hands down to encircle both of their rampant cocks. He squeezed them together, enjoying the exquisite feeling and knowledge that what one felt, so did the other. He started slow, languid strokes that were soon completely in synch with the rhythms Methos was setting with his mouth.

No longer in any rush, Duncan settled in, focusing totally on the sensations Methos was producing with his kiss. The point was not to reach a finish, but to explore one another and take enjoyment in the process. It was a slow, steady titillation that would take a very long time to build...and MacLeod looked forward to extending his personal best.



Lucien LaCroix, both a vampire and an old acquaintance of Methos, floated above a boat yard, attracted to it by the definite sensation of an Immortal's buzz. He had found himself drawn to Paris by a sudden craving for another tryst with his favorite Immortal and the accompanying

sweet taste of the ancient one's blood. Knowing Methos might possibly be located by finding Duncan MacLeod first, LaCroix searched the memories he had absorbed from Methos's blood, then flew to where the barge should be tied up. He found only a rain-swollen river.

Not ready to end his search so quickly, he traveled both downstream and up, finally discovering this boat yard and the unusual emanations from it. It seemed that Lady Luck was with him, for he was sure he could feel the presence of two Immortals on the ship below.

Carefully, he floated down closer and stared through a wide window in the stern of the vessel. His superior night vision more than compensated for the fact that he had to peer through the tilted slats of the half-closed blinds; he easily saw an enormous bed and movement on it.

He leaned forward to get a better view.

In the uncertain light, he could see the pale body of Methos on all fours, his muscles taut and well-defined by their exertions. There behind him was the Immortal named Duncan MacLeod, his skin darker, more olive in color, his long, dark hair loose, half covering his face. He had hold of Methos' hips and was rhythmically thrusting into him, a look of concentration and distance on his face, his muscles bunched and corded with his effort. Both men were covered in sweat, their skin glistening and their hair clumped and wet. They had obviously been at this for a very long time.

LaCroix felt a surge of jealousy as he watched the Highlander enjoying the very thing he had come in search of. Giving in to a rather vicious mood, he began to change his plans for the evening, expanding them to include his unpleasant temperament.



Duncan shifted a little, inching closer. The new angle was devastating for Methos and Duncan's hot shaft was now pounding into his prostate. Methos wanted to hold back until he was sure MacLeod was about to come, but the Highlander's stamina was proving to be awesome tonight. Near to exhaustion from hours of lovemaking, Methos was desperate for release from this, the latest of their couplings. Duncan was relentless and Methos could hear him gasping for breath as he strained harder, faster towards completion within the ancient Immortal's own body. If this didn't end soon, Methos thought they both would die from heart failure. The thought of perishing in the sheer ecstasy of the Highlander's embrace was enough to tip the scales. He cried out and gave up, not knowing whether it was to death or an orgasm he was relinquishing his soul to — only that it would occur in the arms of Duncan MacLeod. He felt his scrotum contract, pulling his balls higher as he came hard, spurting his climax, his body tight, jerking, and totally overwhelmed.

Slowly, his vision and hearing cleared from the blackness that had threatened to drown him and he became aware of a new sensation — the strange, vaguely unpleasant presence that a different type of Immortal generated; a vampire was near. LaCroix or someone else; either way it was bad news.

"Damn!" he cursed. He looked around and noticed that Duncan's katana lay against the wall, next to the head of the bed.

"Duncan," he gritted. "You have to stop; there is danger."

There was no lessening to the deep, powerful thrusts that stretched and filled him. He leaned forward to try to reach the weapon with his right hand, but the movement shifted him away from Duncan.

The Highlander was almost there. He had worked for a very long time on this climax and nothing

else existed save the man on his knees in front of him and the sweet goal that was coming ever closer. When he felt Methos try to pull away from him, he groaned in frustration. No, he would not be denied this!

Cupping his left hand around the back of Methos' head, he shifted his weight, pushing his partner face first into the soft mattress. He brought his left knee onto Methos' calf, effectively preventing him from moving further. He surged forward until his right hand could grab the hand that Methos was extending. Clasp ing it, he brought it close to the body he had trapped beneath him, providing him with yet better leverage. Thoroughly in control, he strengthened his thrusts, giving in to the blind desire that would tolerate no other possibility than for him to finish in the heavenly, hot tightness he possessed completely.

He felt a ripple of ineffectual movement in the body pinned beneath him and an accompanying rush of power as the realization hit that Methos was now his prisoner, securely restrained and totally under his control. The eroticism inherent in the idea of holding the ancient Immortal against his will flamed through him like white fire and he came hard, crying out as he shoved himself fully into his captive.

The intensity of MacLeod's orgasm surrounded Methos with an iron grip as his partner's desperate need poured into him, the molten warmth pooling deep inside. Spent and exhausted, MacLeod collapsed heavily on top of him, gasping for breath. Methos was loath to disturb what should have been their most intimate moments together, but he was even more alarmed by what would happen if he didn't. "Duncan, please...get off! We have trouble!" he persisted.

"What are you going on about?" MacLeod asked dazedly, letting his face rest in Methos' soft dark hair, breathing deep the familiar scent of his lover as it mixed with the tanginess of sex.

A new voice spoke behind them. "He means you have an intruder."

"What...?" Duncan said, startled; he began to push himself off Methos.

"I think not," came the decisive, cool reply.

Methos was crushed as the weight above him doubled. He felt a brief but violent struggle and then Duncan went limp.

"MacLeod! Duncan!" he shouted, trying to squeeze out sideways from the crushing weight. "LaCroix! Don't you hurt him! LaCroix!" Immediately above his ear, he could hear a noisy sucking and swallowing, could feel warm liquid trickling down his own neck. He became more frantic, thrashing about in his attempt to turn and see what the hell was going on behind him.

"Dear gods...no. Don't you do this, LaCroix! Do you hear me? Stop this now!"

Suddenly the vampire's cold hand closed over his mouth and nose, clamping down firmly. He couldn't breathe and he fought wildly, but the combined weight of the two men, plus being pushed into a soft mattress, gave him nothing to lever against. His desperate hunger for air panicked him. The pounding of his blood filled his head and, finally, blackness swallowed his sight; he went limp.



LaCroix had tired of Methos making such a fuss, so he had simply denied the Immortal air until he passed out. LaCroix had not killed Methos, for that did not fit into the vampire's plan. He finished feeding from Methos' big male lover, but he was careful not to take his fill; his plans required that he save room for some of Methos' delightful life's blood.

Pushing himself away, he waited for the gash

wound on MacLeod's neck to heal with the blue energy that was intrinsic to all Immortals, but it was slow in coming. No matter. LaCroix knew his beautiful warrior was Immortal and was in no danger; he would recover. Still hungry, the vampire watched the blood surge sluggishly from the wound in synch with the rapid beat of the Highlander's strong heart, and when he looked at MacLeod's face, he found the eyes open and frightened.

"Don't worry; you'll survive. The rest of what I have planned concerns your lover." LaCroix paused as the erotic images and feelings he had absorbed through the Highlander's passion-flavored blood inflamed his already jealous mood. "I've had him before, you know; hundreds of years before you were even born and again more recently," he said spitefully. "Now you will have the rare honor of watching as I take him again."

MacLeod's expression darkened with anger and he twisted about, trying to seize LaCroix, but his movements were clumsy and weak from blood loss. "No! You will not!" he rasped.

LaCroix stared intensely into the brown eyes. "No, **you** will not," he said, forcing his will onto MacLeod. "You cannot move. You can not speak. You are unable to do anything but remain still and watch. Who knows — you may enjoy it," he said, a small smile playing about his lips.

By the thunderstruck expression on MacLeod's face, LaCroix was satisfied that his command was effective. Pulling MacLeod off the very limp Methos, he wrestled the muscular body to the head of the bed. He left MacLeod lying on his side, propped against the headboard, yet turned so he would witness in silent horror what LaCroix was about to do.

Knowing from past experiences that he would not have much time, LaCroix quickly shed his clothes. Reaching down, he found a shirt that belonged to the much larger MacLeod. He gave

it a twist and used it to blindfold Methos. Grabbing an arm and a thigh, he shifted the slack body and, with a flip, turned him over onto his back. He lifted the knees, effectively exposing lax, spent genitals and the glistening pink bud of the tender anus. LaCroix's erection, now possible due to MacLeod's blood, strained for the supple body so close. Emitting a deep, primal growl, the vampire positioned Methos' legs over his shoulders and thrust himself home. The tight passage was creamy and slick with the Highlander's essence, and LaCroix set a relentless rhythm.

As Methos gasped back to consciousness, LaCroix settled him, sending him the message that it was his lover, MacLeod, who now had possession of his body.

Feeling as though he had simply been enthusiastically woken, Methos smiled and brought his hands up to caress the body that strained above him, stretching and fucking him so thoroughly. "You are insatiable tonight," he said sleepily. Using his nails to rake across the muscular ribs, he arched himself to meet the drives that were pounding into him and he groaned. He felt his own erection begin to fill again. "Gods...what does this make? Three times tonight?" Fingering the cloth tied around his head, he continued, "Something new, eh? Very well, but I wonder how far you are prepared to go down that path."

LaCroix drove harder when he felt the energy within him start to move. Unable to hold off any longer, he gripped the slight man and ground into him. The quickening energy that had been transferred into him through MacLeod's blood gathered and shot in painful ecstasy out of him to be sucked into Methos through their point of greatest intimacy. Both men were frozen in place, paralyzed by the electrical discharge and the intense orgasms ripping through them.

Still clutched by the delightful pain, LaCroix elbowed the slender legs to either side and

dropped heavily down, gasping. His hands skimmed greedily over the incredible, lithe body beneath him as he felt with agonizing ecstasy the muscles around his erection clench, milking the sensitized shaft with a technique he hadn't felt for centuries. As good as sex had been between them before, he now realized that Methos had not fully participated. The vampire envied the Highlander for being the recipient of the gift of the ancient Immortal's love and unique talents. Having drunk MacLeod's blood, LaCroix had tasted his memories. He knew intimately what these two Immortals had done for each other, to each other, and how it had felt. He grew resentful and he turned his head to catch MacLeod staring at him, the paralyzed Immortal's eyes hard with cold fury. Compelled by an evil notion to flaunt his victory, LaCroix let his tongue slide up to an ear and after a moment's tease, pushed the point into the ear itself. The body beneath him shuddered with pleasure.



Methos was truly contented. He could smell MacLeod and he luxuriated under his warm, heavy body, wishing the firm embrace would never end. He curved his lower legs behind MacLeod's broad back, using his heel to caress as he hugged the Highlander closer. When a tongue dove into his ear, he squirmed, reminded of how Tessa would do that.

He paused. He had never met Tessa; why would that pop suddenly into his mind? He thought back to his recent climax; it had almost felt like a quickening.... Puzzled, he searched the energy and impressions that were unique to his immortal self and froze, a sudden feeling of dread gripping his heart.

He tore off the blindfold and stared up into LaCroix's face inches from his own. His mouth dropped open and realization after realization hit him, his eyes growing rounder with each thought. "What have you done?" he whispered, horrified.

"I have MacLeod's quickening! What in god's name have you done?! You **bastard!**" He lunged up at the vampire, the movement forcing LaCroix's cock to slither out of him. Enraged, he grabbed LaCroix by the throat, squeezing as hard as he could manage.

LaCroix reared back and slapped Methos for his impertinence. The angry blow was stunning and Methos went momentarily slack.

"If you are so concerned about your lover, all you have to do is look above you," LaCroix said coldly.

Shaking off the sting, Methos twisted his head to the left and saw still, pale legs lying lifelessly. Panicked, he twisted the other way and made eye contact with MacLeod. The Highlander was too white, nearly translucent from the severe depletion of blood. At his throat, the large wound still oozed, the precious fluid flowing in glistening rivulets across his throat. MacLeod lay there unmoving, his eyes showing the frustration and fury he felt.

"Yes," LaCroix said. "He lives still."

Methos bucked his hips and pushed his hands against the vampire's chest. "Get the hell away from me! Get off me, now," he hissed, filled with cold anger. He tried to wiggle away but LaCroix held him down, pressing his hard cock against him, blindly seeking entrance again. The struggle was brief and doomed to failure; LaCroix, with his unnatural strength, was easily able to subdue Methos with one hand, using the other one to guide his cock in. Methos hissed as he felt the sharp, bright pain as he was again impaled.

LaCroix, smiling cruelly, grabbed Methos' hands and pinned them beside his head. "You are mistaken if you think we are through."

"We **are** through." He was furious at the liberties the vampire was taking. "I'm only telling you once more; get off of me!" he ordered.

LaCroix started thrusting, each drive hard and jabbing. "Did I ever tell you how intoxicating I find anger? How **stimulating** it can be to a vampire?"

"You bastard!" he breathed. He attempted to kick LaCroix, but the vampire had both superior speed and better reaction time. LaCroix suddenly had hold of his ankles and he spread Methos' legs straight out to each side, forcing them wide open. Methos cried out in pain.

"Foolish, foolish little man; I **will** have you," LaCroix taunted cruelly. "We can either do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way," he said, viciously emphasizing his words with a tendon-wrenching jerk.

Methos raged impotently as all his attempts at resistance and refusal were easily and callously disregarded. He felt humiliated by both the assault he was enduring and the knowledge that MacLeod was witnessing it.

Duncan. Dear gods! How could he possibly have the quickening energy from an Immortal who was still alive? What had LaCroix done? The combination of fear and distress for the Highlander tormented Methos even further and his eyes burned from the hot fluid that gathered in them.

LaCroix brought up one of Methos' feet and leaned over, giving a wet kiss to the ankle. Methos closed his eyes and turned his head to the side, rejecting what little he had in his power to refuse — even if it was just to deny LaCroix the satisfaction of looking him in the eyes.

Displeased, LaCroix used one of his canines with surgical precision to slice open a pale blue vein that ran along the top of the foot. The blood flowed warm and red down the ankle and lower leg until the vampire twisted to lick it up. He latched onto the wound, sucking the sweet fluid out in time with the thrusts of his pelvis. He moaned in pleasure at the combined sensations;

he had never known anyone else who could offer the range of sensual delights that came with Methos.

But for Methos the sex wasn't erotic, it was just painful. His will had been ignored, his body overpowered, and he ached from its violation. He had been raped in the past but it was something he would never become used to. Assaults like this stripped him of his confidence and reminded him of how vulnerable he really was. Being five thousand years old did not make him a superhero, only very, very experienced.

Seeking solace in the only place it was available to him, he opened his eyes and looked to Duncan MacLeod — then wished he hadn't. He had never seen MacLeod look so utterly hopeless before, his face a mask of rage and frustration. Methos found himself wishing he could crawl over to Duncan and hold him, and in return, be enfolded within the Highlander's strong embrace.

When he saw MacLeod's eyes widen with horror, he prepared himself. Knowing LaCroix's habits, he lifted his chin, exposing his throat even more. He felt his thighs flexed up and pushed wide, then his neck suffered a powerful blow. Large, sharp teeth brutally sliced open his throat and, in pain, he cried out in an ancient tongue. The hot mouth clamped onto him and he could feel the hard, relentless vacuum and was torturously aware of the agony of having his life force violently pulled out of him. LaCroix's feeding had never hurt this intensely before and he panicked, pushing hard against the broad chest that held him pressed down. LaCroix's heavy weight settled further on him, smothering him, as one of the vampire's hands held his head cruelly to the side while the other roamed freely across his chest, pinching him. Desperate for it to stop, he could do nothing but wonder how much more he would have to endure.

When LaCroix could drink no more, he leaned back to look at Methos' face, and for the first time noticed the glistening eyes and a face that was

both closed and bitter. So caught up in his own sensations and the rush of power, he had been oblivious to the turmoil Methos was feeling. The depth of hurt and suffering rising from Methos surprised him.

"Come on! You make too much of it! You know this is the way it is," he said irritated.

"You filthy Roman dog," Methos spat in Latin.

The old oath and the tone of voice used to deliver it stung, but LaCroix only smiled. "Always, my dear Methos. Never forget it," he said maliciously as he resumed thrusting, reveling in the absolute power he wielded.

"Bastard," Methos said, continuing to stare hatefully at his rapist.

"Would it give you satisfaction to know that you guessed right about that?" LaCroix moaned, feeling his eyes beginning to dilate as the quickening power coalesced within him. He gazed down, enthralled by his captive, and licked his lips with anticipation. "It begins," he whispered reverently and claimed Methos' mouth in a punishing kiss. His eyes rolled up as the quickening energy that was in the blood he had drunk sought to return to its rightful owner. The white power snapped and crackled where their skins touched, the dry connection causing the electrical force to jump between them, feeling like a thousand strong static shocks. Where their bodies merged together in a moist coupling, the quickening surged through without resistance. The sensitive nerve endings were quickly overloaded and the powerful orgasm that LaCroix sought exploded through him.

But Methos was not aroused and the energy did not release a climax. Instead, it felt more like a cruel application of electricity to the most sensitive parts of his body. He stiffened in agony and would have screamed, but his body was held rigid by the overpowering current.

With a groan, LaCroix collapsed spent and exhausted in a sated sprawl across Methos. It wasn't until he felt the fine tremors coursing through the body beneath him that LaCroix pushed himself up and off the strangely quiet Immortal. He staggered to his feet and watched warily as Methos slowly curled onto his side in a semi-fetal position. Puzzled by the strange and atypical reaction, he was uneasy, but nevertheless, he gathered his trousers and shoes and headed for the toilet facilities to clean up, confident Methos would soon be his old self again.

When LaCroix returned, Methos had pushed himself up to sit at the edge of the bed. The Immortal paused, grimacing painfully as he straightened his back and shoulders. Shifting about to try to find a better position, one hand went to his lower abdomen and he rubbed at it, groaning. He shot an accusing look at the vampire.

For the first time, LaCroix noticed that Methos' sex was limp and pale with no sign of discharge. "You didn't come," he remarked, surprised.

Methos worked at keeping his anger down. "That's right," he said tightly. "That wasn't sex; that was rape. And it hurt. All of it."

LaCroix had always found Methos to be initially reluctant to participate in their occasional trysts but always cooperative and enthusiastic by the end. He had assumed Methos was being more spirited in his refusal because his Immortal lover was watching this time. LaCroix glanced at Duncan MacLeod and was disconcerted by the naked fury he saw there. He looked back to Methos. "I've always found that you've enjoyed being overpowered. You've never had this reaction before."

Methos burned with embarrassment at the too accurate observation, wishing MacLeod had not heard that last remark, for they were only just reaching the stage in their relationship where revealing games could be ventured. "There is a

difference, LaCroix. Besides, this time you went too far; you've hurt someone I care about."

Frowning pensively at the pair on the bed, the vampire began to realize he might have made a miscalculation. Blinded by his feelings of jealousy and envy, he could see now that he might have exceeded the limits of what was permissible in this strange relationship he maintained with Methos. By bringing Methos' cherished lover into the mix, he had activated the ancient Immortal's instincts of protection and defense. Methos was reacting strongly to the threat he sensed against MacLeod.

LaCroix was uneasy. The sex had been exhilarating as always, but what had been the price for this little escapade? "But he is like you," LaCroix defended. "He can't be injured permanently."

"You have meddled with something you know **nothing** about!" Methos seethed with barely controlled fury. He leaned over and grabbed the rest of the vampire's clothes from the bed and threw them at LaCroix. The throw was bad and the shirt and jacket fell into a heap not very far away. "Just get out," he said, his voice filled with disgust.

LaCroix conceded it was best that he leave; he tilted his head in acquiescence. He stepped closer and bent down to pick up his clothes. When he attempted to straighten up, he felt the cold, sharp edge of a sword against the back of his neck. He froze.

Methos' voice was chilling. "Smart," he approved. "Because if you even think about moving, I'll kill you, and you know I can."

LaCroix wasn't too sure that Methos could move that fast, but he wasn't inclined to test it; beheadings were one of the ways that a vampire might be permanently dispatched. He could see out of the corner of his eye that the katana was no longer lying against the wall and knew that

Methos must have retrieved it while LaCroix was in the bathroom cleaning up. Japanese swords were famous for their slicing abilities and with a minimal movement and effort, Methos could do as he threatened. It was not a trial of speed and reflexes LaCroix was eager to put to the test.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice suddenly conciliatory.

"Right. First, what have you done to MacLeod?"

"Nothing harmful. It is only my will that keeps him still."

"Well then, you better find it in your will to release him. Do it now," he demanded, taking a firmer grip on the handle of the weapon.

"Of course. I would have done that anyway before I left."

"Shut up and do it."

MacLeod jerked, groaned and lunged over onto his stomach. He immediately started to crawl weakly towards the edge of the bed. "Keep the bastard there till I can get to your sword," he gasped.

LaCroix could see the promise of righteous retribution in the dark eyes of the Highlander and he felt a sudden desire to be somewhere else. If he was fast enough to avoid the sweep of Methos' sword, he would be free to leave, but now that both his hunger and lust had been satisfied, he felt more contrite towards Methos. The ancient Immortal was too good a fuck to alienate completely; perhaps he should make an honest attempt at a reconciliation instead of simply trying to escape.

LaCroix slowly tilted his head until he could see Methos' expression and he truly felt a pang of regret when he saw the hurt and anger there. Deciding to take a chance, LaCroix sighed and ever-so-slowly began to straighten up.

Instantly alarmed, Methos stiffened, his eyes wide. As LaCroix inched up, Methos kept the blade against his neck until the vampire was nearly standing. With the dynamics all wrong for the maneuver he had planned, Methos withdrew the katana, bringing the weapon close and into a ready position. As LaCroix stayed still and nonthreatening, the tenseness of the situation dissipated as did the visible strain in Methos' body. The Immortal stood waiting, alert, and very wary.

"Methos!" MacLeod cried out, fearing the vampire was mesmerizing his lover. "Don't look at him!"

Peeved at the attempted interference, LaCroix glanced in irritation at MacLeod...and instantly saw Methos' expression change into deadly resolve. Methos was primed to react badly to any perceived threat against his love and the vampire held up his hands in a placating gesture of surrender. "It was never my intention to inflict any permanent harm on him — I give you my word on that," he said, soothingly, with complete sincerity. "Perhaps it would be best for all concerned if I just left."

"Oh, no! No!" Duncan protested, his accent growing stronger. "A creature like that cannae be allowed to live!"

Methos frowned at the words and LaCroix took advantage of his doubt. "If I go now, no one has to suffer any further damage," he said, purposely conjuring up what the result would be if Methos allowed their troubles to escalate into a struggle to the death. "You are both weakened and I am strong." When he saw the resentment in the hazel eyes, LaCroix quickly added, "And I also wish to apologize, Methos. You are right; I went too far. You know I value our friendship too much to wish an end to it. I admit I am guilty of both poor judgement and ignorance in the ways of Immortals. I am sure it is due to my sad lack of experience with others of your kind," he added, dolefully.

LaCroix apologizing? That was a first. The aura of danger dispersed and Methos knew the crisis had passed. Still aching from the physical abuse, he was unwilling to forgive unconditionally and he slowly shook his head. "Don't press your luck, LaCroix." Suddenly very tired, he let the katana drop down into a nonthreatening position. "Just go."

LaCroix had to raise his voice to be heard over the very vocal protestations now coming from MacLeod. "I promise I will make this up to you."

"Yeah, well, you better not try to anytime soon."

The vampire bowed slightly. "As you wish," he said. And then he vanished as if he had never even been there.



MacLeod blinked in astonishment. "Where did he go?" he demanded. "How did he do that?"

Methos sighed, already exhausted by the mere thought of the immense task ahead of him: how to explain it all to MacLeod. He walked wearily to the galley and opened the refrigerator, pulling out bottled water, a carton of fruit juice, and all the beer he could carry. "Give me a minute, please...", he quietly begged as MacLeod continued vocally in the background.

The silence that settled throughout the barge crackled with impatience but Methos was grateful for the momentary respite, the chance to gather himself. It was either the calm in the eye of the storm, or the hush that followed a cloudburst. He hoped it would be the latter; he felt brittle, stretched to his limits.

Back at the bedside, he dumped the sealed containers on the bed and laid the katana amidst the bottles. Looking up, he met MacLeod's eyes, feeling his heart ache at the expression of hurt and

betrayal he saw in them. He climbed on top of the bed and, on his knees, inched over to where MacLeod lay sprawled. Slipping his hands around the tense torso, he lifted and pulled, nudging MacLeod back. "Come," he murmured. "I will explain everything."

"You said that last time," he said accusingly, allowing Methos to tug and maneuver him until he was lying back against Methos' chest, wrapped protectively in his lover's arms.

Methos grimaced, realizing he had erred months ago. LaCroix had swooped out of nowhere, literally stealing Methos away for a night of debauchery. When MacLeod had pressed for an explanation, Methos, when recovered, was too embarrassed and had given evasions and vague answers. Though lovers for less than a fortnight, MacLeod had respected Methos privacy and let the matter drop. Now, the situation was far worse--as the questions would be.

He scooped up the carton of juice and pressed it into MacLeod's hand. "Drink this," he said softly, leaning his head against Duncan's, proffering a tender kiss to his cheek as a peace offering.

Duncan sighed, then took a long draught of the cool liquid. Finishing about half, he passed the container back to Methos. "How could you let him go? After what he did to you...it wasn't right."

"I know...now he knows it, too." Methos sipped at the juice.

"He shouldna know anything; he should be dead. You let him go, Methos."

"He could have easily killed us both." When MacLeod started to protest, Methos hushed him with soothing strokes along his arm. "It's true. LaCroix is too fast and strong; you saw him disappear, you felt his strength. He can immobilize a man with a thought...and he knows the only way we can be killed."

MacLeod was uneasy. "Then why didn't he?"

Finished with the juice, Methos tossed the carton away. He chose the water for MacLeod and a beer for himself; he twisted the top off and took a long pull from the bottle. "Keep drinking," he ordered. "You'll feel better." When MacLeod did as he was told, Methos continued. "Believe it or not, LaCroix did not mean any harm."

MacLeod snorted his disbelief. "I can not bel —"

"It is true," Methos interrupted. "LaCroix likes games; things just got out of hand," he offered lamely. How could he explain to MacLeod that LaCroix was right; that Methos did enjoy the notion of being forced on occasion? That while he didn't even know LaCroix well enough to call him friend or enemy, **he didn't care**; he was addicted to the mind-blowingly intense sex he shared with the vampire. Or that to him, being abused was not the showstopper it was for most other people? There were things and people in the ancient Immortal's past that he didn't know if he could ever share with Duncan MacLeod, who in his four hundred years of life still had not discovered that there were a million shades of grey versus the two-tones that made up black and white.

"He raped you, Methos." MacLeod's voice shook at the words.

The truth fell heavily and left a long silence in its wake. Despite what LaCroix had intended, despite their games in the past, it was the truth and Methos was still shaken by the attack.

"Yes. I know." His voice sounded small and desolate even to his own ears. Shocked, he tried to cover the lapse and noisily cleared his throat. "What's done is done," he said, praying that MacLeod would take the hint and drop the subject. "Now we have to decide wha —"

This time, MacLeod interrupted. "I am so sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry for."

"I wanted to help you, to stop him — but I couldn't. I tried...This is not over," he said, twisting around to look his lover in the eye.

Methos could see the promise of retribution in those dark eyes and it frightened him. He didn't need the gift of prophesy to see that one day he would have to explain everything to MacLeod, his whole sordid past — and Methos had no faith that their relationship would survive such a revelation. To save MacLeod from the folly of challenging LaCroix, Methos would have to risk what they now shared.

Methos looked away from the future he saw reflected in the Highlander's earnest eyes. "Please, MacLeod. Leave it be or at least for now," he pleaded quietly. "We have more important things to discuss."

MacLeod curled further around until he could face Methos, bringing both his hands up to gently frame the angular face. "What could be more important than this despair I see in your eyes?" he asked softly.

Methos swallowed hard, searching for the strength to resist what his heart would freely give — which was anything Duncan MacLeod asked for.

Forcing his eyes away, he placed his own palm against MacLeod's bloody neck, then held it up so MacLeod could see the moist evidence himself. "This is more important, Highlander. You are still bleeding."

"So?"

"You are not healing as fast as you should be and...I have your quickening — or at least part of it."

MacLeod shook his head. "That's impossible."

Methos picked up the katana and angled it so he could bring its razor, sharp edge down on MacLeod's forearm with a gentle tap. The blade left a thin, red line, slicing MacLeod's skin without sensation; the Highlander stared at it. A minute passed and still the wound remained, blood beading along its length.

"And I have memories of Tessa."

MacLeod stared up in shock, finally beginning to realize Methos spoke the truth. "How could you?! It's impossible!"

"It's happened before with LaCroix; every time he feeds off one of us, some of our power seems to be transferred with the blood. I think the fact that it goes directly from one body to another fools it for a brief while. Then, after a few minutes, it rushes back into the nearest Immortal. Unfortunately, I was closer and your quickening went from LaCroix into me. It seems to show no interest in returning to you."

MacLeod looked distinctly worried. "What does this mean? Will it regenerate? Am I now mortal?"

"I wish I knew." Methos had a few theories; might as well start with the easiest one. "Let me try something," he said, using the katana to slice open one of his own hands.

Duncan startled at the unexpected bloodshed under his own eyes, and Methos quickly said, "No, stay right here." He brought his bleeding palm flat against Duncan's still-oozing neck wound, and waited.

Nothing happened.

"Does this make us blood brothers?" Duncan asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Methos stared back darkly, not amused. It was an unpleasant phrase from his ancient past, a serious oath-taking that still held some power, even

today. "It would...in some cultures."

He removed his hand and they watched it mend, the bright electrical energy sealing the cut, the swiftness of the healing emphasizing that something was seriously wrong with Duncan's ability.

He wiped the blood off onto bedsheets that were already ruined by many dark red stains. "Well, you could try drinking my blood," he offered, keeping any hint of emotion out of his voice.

"No," MacLeod said firmly.

Methos took in a deep breath and prepared himself for the suggestion that had to be made. "Or I could ask LaCroix if..."

"Absolutely not!" MacLeod looked murderous at the very mention of the vampire's name.

"It may be the only wa — "

"Then I'll do without."

"That could be a fatal decision. You aren't healing; maybe this means that any death would now be permanent for you. Challenges would..."

"I said I'll do without. I'll nae have that creature touch you or me again!"

Patience stretched to the limit by the Scot's stubbornness, Methos waited long moments before he ventured another remark. "I don't exactly hear you offering any suggestions," he said testily.

"Here's one; we wait," he said firmly. "The power may strengthen on its own. Let's give it a few days."

"I hope you are right, Duncan, but if it doesn't come back, we **will** have to try something else."

"It'll come back," MacLeod assured him.

But it didn't.



MacLeod was first to rappel down into the comforting darkness of the ancient site. Cool air caressed his exposed skin and the earthy smell of damp clay rose about him, surrounding him with the sense of immense age. His feet scuffed lightly at the soil as he touched down and regained his balance. Unhooking his harness from the tough nylon cord, he anxiously squinted up into the grey circle of daylight that hovered above him. Loath to disturb the profound stillness with words, he whistled a bird call and gave the rope a sharp flick. Within a minute, Methos was gracefully lowering himself down. MacLeod reached a steadying hand up to stop Methos' slow rotation, guiding his lover to a safe landing at his side.

When MacLeod stayed close, Methos snuck a penetrating look at him. "Do you remember much from before?" he asked with studied casualness as he freed himself from the line and harness.

MacLeod shrugged. "Some." He walked a few steps toward the holy spring, then warily turned to eye a dark passageway to the side. "My memories are...fragmented, confusing," he reluctantly admitted, frowning.

Methos stepped next to Duncan. "This place does that to a person," he said, flashing Duncan a quick, reassuring grin. "Are you sure you are ready for this?" It had been over three days since the events on the barge had taken place, and Duncan showed no sign of returning to normal. In the end, both men had become more worried and, with their restlessness increasing, it was easy to decide to do something, anything — even putting their faith and future in the power of a holy spring.

Duncan took in a deep breath and sighed heavily. "Ye know I trust you, Methos. If ye feel that this is our best chance at puttin' things to rights, then

I am ready."

Methos barely suppressed a second smile when he heard the Highlander's accent deepen; this place had him spooked all right.

Methos glanced about, feeling the eerie spidery tingling that was unique to this sacred place. There was great power here and, if the truth be told, even though he respected it, it unnerved him also.

"Let's do it." Decisively, he took the lead and made his way to where a pool of water glowed with a shimmering whitish-blue light. He stared down at the luminous spring, then shrugged out of his coat. Smoothly, he pulled off both his sweater and shirt and dropped them on top of his coat at the poolside.

Duncan was staring at him, more than a little shocked. "What do ye think you are doing?"

"Whatever happens here today, at least our clothes will be dry afterwards," he said, pulling off his shoes. "Besides, I've a personal rule about not contaminating holy springs with dirty socks if it can possibly be avoided."

Duncan nodded his head in reluctant agreement and began to strip.

When they had both shed all their clothes, Methos held out his hand to Duncan. "Together," he murmured, half request, half promise.

MacLeod took the proffered hand and gripped it tightly. "Together." His words were all promise.

In tandem, they stepped into the pool, its warm waters soothing and welcoming. When they reached the center, they stopped and waited. The waters grew brighter, and streaks of pale energy gathered and dissipated on the waves that lapped gently at the earthen sides, but nothing else happened.

"Now what?" MacLeod asked, his voice hushed.

"Time for plan B," Methos said, turning to lean towards his clothes. He pulled a dagger from his coat and returned to the center of the pool and Duncan.

MacLeod eyed the glittering blade worriedly. "Bloodshed? Here?"

Methos reversed the blade in his hand. "Blood is what got us into this mess in the first place." He shifted, moving his feet more than shoulder-width apart, and slid the weapon below the waterline. With extreme care, he placed the tip of the dagger against the point where the top of his pubic hair met a groove formed where his leg and abdomen joined together. He lifted his gaze to meet Duncan's bewildered eyes. "Femoral artery," he explained, and jabbed the blade home.

With a wince, he pulled the knife out and tossed it back near his clothes. Bright red blood spurted out into the pool, each strong pulse of Methos' heart pushing the precious fluid out of his body. Fascinated, they watched, and, within seconds, they could no longer see the bottom of the spring. Within another dozen heartbeats, all the water was a lustrous crimson. MacLeod felt a wave of dizziness as the quality of the water changed and transmuted; now the pool sparkled as if it were an enormous ruby, the waves acting as facets that refracted the brilliance within and lighting up the whole chamber with an eerie radiance of vivid scarlet. MacLeod could feel the energy dance and crawl across his skin as that, too, intensified.

Beside him, he heard Methos groan, and he lunged for him as the ancient's suddenly slack body slipped beneath the water. Grabbing an arm, he pulled Methos to him, threading his own arm around the nearly unconscious man's chest and drawing him up. Pressing his lover close, he encouraged the dark head to fall limply back until it was resting on his shoulder and safe above the waterline. Worried that Methos was still losing blood, he felt about until he found the puncture

wound and applied pressure, hoping to stanch the warm flow enough that it would heal faster.

The tingling grew stronger and MacLeod, crouching down in the water to support Methos' dead weight, grew concerned; from what he remembered from last time, it hadn't been anything like this. They must have been crazy to trust their lives to a sacred phenomenon that they knew very little about. What if the water became hazardous? Would he be able to remove Methos in time from this slippery place? Suddenly, he was filled with doubt, and he protectively held Methos tighter.

Methos groaned and an energy wave surged throughout the crimson water. MacLeod felt him take in a deep breath, then another low groan was pulled out of the ancient Immortal as he suffered some unknown pain. Another wave of power rippled through the water.

"Methos," MacLeod whispered. "What is wrong? Can you talk to me?" He rubbed his cheek against the wet hair that was plastered to Methos' head and wished he knew what to do.

Methos bucked and moaned again, and the resulting power surge was stronger yet. MacLeod gasped as, this time, he felt the energy course into him. He could feel the power innervating his whole body; now that it was back, he was more aware of what he had been missing.

"Methos! Methos, it's working," he whispered, praying that he had guessed right.

The reply was mumbled, but Duncan distinctly heard the word "good."

After three further waves of energy flowed from Methos to Duncan, and three further groans that indicated increasing amounts of pain, Methos began to struggle weakly, trying to get his feet under him. "No more, Duncan. Please, no more..." he gasped. "'S'nough...!"

It was the words that Duncan had been waiting for. He floated Methos to the edge of the pool and, with a mighty heave, rolled him up and out of the crimson water. He followed him onto dry land and immediately his skin contracted as the cool air hit his wet flesh. He knelt down beside Methos and touched his shoulder. "Can you walk?"

Methos shook his head. "No. Not just yet. Give me a moment first," he said, a tremor running through him.

"You're cold." Picking up Methos' coat, MacLeod shook it out and, lying beside Methos, flipped it over them both. He took his lover's chilled body into his arms and held him close.

"S much better," Methos said, relaxing some. "I could stay like this for hours." He sighed, then shifted. "Or until the ground gets too cold and hard."

"The sooner we get dressed, the sooner we will be warm, and the sooner we will get back to the barge."

Methos smiled, and Duncan felt encouraged that he would make a quick recovery.

"Well, I can't argue with logic like that," Methos said. "But first I need to know; how do you feel? Are you back to normal? God, I don't want to have to go through this again."

MacLeod leaned in close, his lips softly tracing over Methos' before he went back for a kiss of such sweet passion that it banished all other thoughts from Methos' mind. "Oh. You are back to normal all right," Methos said, his voice deepening. "But do you think this is really an appropriate place for this?"

"The sooner we get dressed, the sooner we will —"

"— be warm and the sooner we will be back on

the barge. Yes, I believe I understood that the first time, Highlander."

"Well then, get off your skinny butt and let's get going."

Methos lifted himself up on his elbows and tilted his head to the side. "Are you sure you don't want to consummate our relationship here on holy ground?"

"Methos..."

A small grin appeared. "Just checking to see how irresistible I am."

MacLeod leaned close and placed a chaste kiss on Methos' forehead. "Supremely. And you know you have my everlasting gratitude. Now, let's go."

EPILOGUE:

A few days later, Methos woke up and stretched luxuriously, taking full advantage of MacLeod's over-large bed. The smell of strong coffee drifted through the barge, enticing him to leave his haven of warmth and comfort. He could just barely hear the sound of a shower and knew where MacLeod had gotten to. The morning was brisk and since the coffee wasn't magically going to come to him, he would have to go to it. He threw back the blankets and sat up sleepily on the bedside. His bare foot nudged a pair of wool-lined slippers. He stared at them and frowned; he could not recall having seen them before. How odd.

With a shrug, he pointed his toes and maneuvered his foot into the slipper, stopping suddenly when he felt something obstructing him. Puzzled, he scooped up the mysterious footwear and slipped his hand inside, pulling out a small black velvet bag that was tied with a golden thread. He carefully loosened the thread, eased open the sack, and lifted out a small, dark jewelry case. Intrigued, he opened it. A small card fell out, revealing two small, golden earrings. They were

hoops and each had a decently sized ruby set in them. The gems glittered brightly and Methos could see they were of high quality.

Very curious, he retrieved the card, held it up to the light, and read the tiny typed words: "The ruby has been prized for centuries as a symbol of Love and Immortality. Ancient lore held that the ruby was capable of curing illness and reconciling lover's quarrels."

Warily, Methos flipped the card over and read the graceful script that personalized the back: "*For you and your friend with my apologies. L.*"



ALGIERS

By Susanna

The ancient ceiling fans turned lazily overhead, barely stirring the hot desert air of the city. Men reclined in their wooden chairs around the room, their dark features standing stark against the whites of the turbans and robes. Long shadows played across the white walls of the bar as the sun dropped toward the horizon. Two men stepped into the bar and stood over to one side. The shorter, slighter man shook his head at the scene before him; while the busy streets of Algiers were as modern as any other city in 1969, time had obviously passed by the bar. Sunglasses' square shoulders betrayed his military bearing. The shorter man's demeanor was distant, as the more affluent were wont to portray. They were dark as he, but not from his land. The tall, muscular man in square sunglasses nudged his companion and nodded toward the occupant in the far corner of the room.

A young Algerian nodded in reply. He pushed himself slowly from the wall and slipped around a corner, hesitating to look back over his shoulder. The foreigners were following cautiously, not wishing to draw attention to themselves, which was truly an impossibility in the spare establishment. Sunglasses' square shoulders betrayed his military bearing, the shorter man's demeanor distant, as the more affluent were wont to portray. They were dark as he, but not from his land. Rounding the corner, the men stopped abruptly. The youth stood silently at the end of the hall, three curtained doorways surrounding him.

"We are here to see your master," Sunglasses said

quietly.

"You must choose," the youth said lightly, his smooth-shaven face never showing emotion. He turned to face each doorway, then turned back to the men.

"What is this?" the shorter one queried, advancing toward the youth. "We are here for business, not for games."

"You did not speak the accepted phrase to me," the youth explained. "My master says you must choose."

The men hesitated and stepped back, consulting in whispers. Sunglasses finally stepped forward. "We shall face his challenge."

The youth nodded and walked past them, back the way he came. "So choose," the shorter man said, waving his arms toward the colorful drapes. Sunglasses muttered in anger at his companion and chose the doorway on the right. He stopped in front of the curtain and raised his arm to brush it aside, and froze, a scimitar's curved blade appearing through his back. His companion began to back away quickly, bumping into the wall, and sprang forward, ready for flight.

The youth was standing facing him. "He chose incorrectly. Now you must choose." Two men in black robes appeared behind the youth, the hilts of their swords jutting from their robes.

The man swallowed hard and backed away from the youth before him, backing all the way into the hallway again. His companion's body was gone; a pool of blood lay before the curtain. He wiped his forehead, unable to take his eyes from the gore, and fell to his knees, placing his hands on his forehead. He looked heavenward and gasped.

"Congratulations," Kronos said, smiling down on him from a loft above the hallway. "Too bad your friend didn't look heavenward for salvation, as you have. Now we can do business." He walked away chuckling, his boots ringing on the stone floor. The man was helped to his feet and gently guided toward a set of stairs behind another curtain.

The youth led them up numerous flights to the top of the stone building. It was one of the tallest in Algiers, and the large windows were battened shut against the sand. Kronos sprawled at the head of a large, low marble table that had lush pillows surrounding it. He wore a blood-red robe over his black street clothes a black burnoose hung loosely around his head; his hair was wavy and shoulder length, the style in Europe for the moment. An electric lamp burned in the back of the room, behind a long silk curtain, the silhouette of a four-poster bed stark against the silk.

The man was helped to sit at the opposite end of the table; a carafe of white wine and a glass sat before him. The youth walked the length of the table with another carafe and glass, setting them before Kronos. He poured a glass, placing it before the Immortal, and knelt on the pillows to the side.

"A toast," Kronos said engagingly, his fierce eyes sparkling. "To a profitable relationship." He waited for the man to unsteadily pick up his glass and nodded toward him, taking a drink of the wine. The man gulped quickly, grateful for the liquid. Kronos finished his glass and held it out to the side for the youth to replenish. "You are a fortunate man. Not many survive such a test to gain my audience."

"There were difficulties," the man said, wiping his forehead. "Our position...changed recently, and certain obstacles had to be...overcome before we could reach you."

"Yes, I know," Kronos replied, grinning. "General,

you and your men barely escaped alive, your leader now in exile, your money stolen by the traitor."

The man turned pale and quickly took another drink, draining his glass. He hesitated a moment, waiting to see if the youth would rise to pour him another. Ignored, he hastily poured for himself, growing more and more disturbed under his host's constant surveillance. "Your information is disturbingly accurate."

"Indeed," Kronos said, smugly. "So shall we assume you have received support from a source recently...as recently as today, I would say? Perhaps a sympathetic neighbor to the east?"

The man lowered his eyes, trying to suppress his anger. His army's informants must be severely dealt with when he returned, for their information about this heathen arms dealer was sorely lacking. "I bow to your superior intelligence," he said, bowing his head even lower. "Your expertise is second to none."

"For once this night, General, you are correct," Kronos said, feigning boredom. He turned to examine the youth sitting to his left. "And I am pleased to inform you that your needs have already been met, the bill paid most handsomely."

"I don't understand," the man stammered, confusion filling his face.

"Sad, isn't it?" Kronos said, turning back to the man, his eyes darkening. "You probably never will." The General turned just in time to see the two robed men come forward quickly and lift him off the pillows. They dragged him to the far wall, throwing him up against it. Kronos rose and followed them, opening the shutters of one of the large windows. "You see, General, it wasn't your precious leader who was ousted — it was you."

The General screamed and bucked as the two men dragged him to the window, Kronos standing to the side, leaning languidly against the wall. Finally, with one last thrust, the robed figures tossed their struggling victim over the sill. Kronos quickly bent out the window and watched the man fall, laughing silently as he hit the ground.

"Shall I send the message now, Master?" the youth asked from the table, dismissing the guards with a quick hand movement.

Kronos turned and shuttered the window, turning toward his servant. He was breathing heavily, the night's objective met with such pleasing finality. "No. Let them wait," he said, his voice rough. "My needs must be met before theirs."

The youth nodded, picked up the wine, rose gracefully from the pillows, and glided toward the bed. Kronos watched transfixed as the youth slid behind the curtain, carefully placing the wine next to the bed. The youth undressed slowly, starting with his turban, unwinding it slowly. Kronos waited until the strips of cloth were dropped upon the bed before he took a step. The youth's layers of robes were dropped silently to the floor, and Kronos licked his lips as he watched the lean, naked figure crawl onto the bed, kneeling, waiting.

As he walked around the curtain, Kronos stopped abruptly. The tinted light from the lamp caught the youth's light brown eyes and made them sparkle. His long hair, free from its confines, hung loosely around his shoulders, a few strands dangling down his hairless chest. He held his hand out to Kronos in invitation, and the Horseman was swept back in time momentarily, the figure before him so familiar.

"Let me remove your clothes, master," the youth said, beginning to rise.

"No," Kronos hissed sharply. "Do not move, unless I order it." He circled the bed slowly, removing his robe, his clothes quickly following, never allowing his gaze to wander from his servant's body. The youth's erection was already growing visibly as Kronos continued to circle the bed, a hunter scrutinizing his prey. He stopped behind the kneeling figure, standing perfectly still, holding his breath. The youth began to fidget after a few minutes of silence, then settled again, his breathing growing deeper.

Kronos waited until the youth's shoulders relaxed visibly to lash out, his hand finding the back of the youth's neck, pushing him over until his face was buried in the mattress. He had simultaneously crawled onto the bed behind the youth, now

allowing his erection to rub against one of the youth's well muscled cheeks. "I thought you had learned your lesson," Kronos said between his teeth. "Must I teach you again?"

The youth whimpered into the bed, and Kronos eased the pressure, just enough to allow him to turn his face and breathe. "I am a slow learner, master," the youth said, panting. "I beg you to have pity upon me, and teach me again."

Kronos moved his hand away and was pleased to see the youth didn't attempt to move. "Here — tie the end of your turban to the bedpost," he directed, tossing the fabric in front of the youth. He watched as his servant complied, then ordered him to wrap the fabric tightly around each wrist. "Now, lean forward and tie the other end to the other bedpost, then lean back." The youth silently followed every direction, Kronos watching the lean, muscular thighs flex as the youth worked, his balls hanging between his legs, his penis erect again.

As the youth finished the knot, Kronos grabbed his legs, pulling him backward quickly and flipping him over onto his back, the fabric twisting tighter into the youth's wrists. "Always expect the unexpected," Kronos breathed to his servant, massaging the youth's thighs, watching his face alternate between the pain of his bonds and the pleasure from his master's touch. He knelt between the youth's legs, admiring the prize before him. "Never underestimate your opponent," he murmured as he bent over the youth to grab a nipple between his teeth.

The body jumped below him, and Kronos bit harder, flicking the small stub with his tongue, then sucking it hard into this mouth. "Never be satisfied the first time," he said, rising to look the young man in the eyes, then slowly lowering himself back to the other nipple, this time biting until he tasted blood. The youth beneath him squirmed, then gasped and thrust upward against his master. Kronos trailed his bloody tongue toward the youth's mouth. His servant quickly captured his master's tongue and sucked it greedily. Kronos growled in the back of his throat and ground his own erection against his servant's, the youth's hips thrusting into his own.

The youth let go of his prize and panted, "master, I have important news of the day."

Kronos kissed the youth's neck, chuckling. "Bribery will get you everywhere. You learned that lesson well enough." He bit savagely into the youth's shoulder and stopped only when he finally groaned in pain.

"A European was seen entering the city," he managed to say as Kronos continued licking and biting his way around the youth's chest.

"What of it?" Kronos said as he slid his tongue down to the youth's navel.

"The passport was irregular, but the European managed to convince the authorities to allow entry," he said in spurts, as his master's attentions were now closer to his throbbing penis.

"That's not very interesting," Kronos said, blowing lightly upon the youth's cock. "I suggest you tell me something soon, or I shall leave you now and find another who can."

"The European was dressed as a man, but indeed, my informants claim she is a woman," he said, a whine beginning to invade his voice. "And a skilled thief."

Kronos allowed the tip of his nose to brush against the underside of the youth's cock, starting at the base and halting before reaching the head. "Tell me more."

"She carries a sword."

Kronos smiled slightly, replacing his nose with his tongue, the youth wiggling in anticipation, his needs beginning to rage. Without warning, Kronos swallowed the youth whole, sucking once, then twice, then quickly releasing him. The youth cried out in anguish and Kronos quickly raised up, bringing the lean but strong hips onto his thighs. He slapped the youth's ass cheek once, then twice. "Never, ever, want something so badly you give your best for it," he said, breathing hard in anticipation, and licked his finger, readying the youth's ass for his entry. The youth relaxed around him, and Kronos replaced his finger with his cock

in one harsh thrust.

He drew the youth's long, willowy legs up over his shoulders and thrust into him, varying his rhythm, the youth becoming frustrated as he tried to match his master. "Never assume you know what your opponent is thinking," Kronos gasped as he leaned forward and pressed his lips savagely into the youth's, teeth meeting teeth, his tongue finding his servant's. The youth could barely breathe against the onslaught of the larger man's weight resting on him, and he squirmed violently to get a breath. Kronos moaned deeply and slowly rose back to his knees, watching as the youth sputtered and choked as he quickened his thrusts. Kronos reached down and gripped the youth's erection in one hand, pumping it roughly in time with his thrusts. He watched the youth's face closely, and as his release neared, Kronos quickly stopped, grabbing it around the base.

The youth's eyes flew open and he cried out in frustration, betrayal on his face. Kronos leered down at the youth. "Never trust your closest allies, for they will always stab you hardest," he grunted as he could take no more, thrusting one more time into the youth. He could feel his servant's muscles tighten around him, and he moaned as the youth milked him expertly. Opening his eyes, Kronos watched as his servant trembled beneath him, his cock beginning to darken.

"I beg you, master," the youth said, swallowing, his chest rising hard.

Kronos removed himself unceremoniously from the youth, who gasped as his thighs hit the bed. "What have I told you about strangers and swords?" he said, lying next to the youth on the bed, his face close to the youth's face.

"That I was to tell you immediately upon seeing one," he squeaked, wriggling his hips in pain.

"Once again, you have shown your disloyalty to me," Kronos crooned, the youth's eyes locked to his. "I should cut off your penis and watch you bleed to death."

The youth's face paled. "Yes, you should, master," he managed to answer. "But I beg you, I have

never failed you before, and I shall prove a worthy servant to you always."

"Always," Kronos echoed, one of his fingers lazily drawing an ancient pattern on the youth's stomach. He watched, gratified, as the youth's hips lunged toward his hand as he let it drop toward the youth's now painful erection. "Turn over." The youth blinked at him. "I gave you an order," Kronos warned. The youth struggled, but managed to flip onto his belly, rubbing his hips immediately into the bed. "Stop!" Kronos snarled, and the youth halted, whimpering again. "Up on your elbows and knees." The youth complied, and Kronos moved around in front of him, spreading his legs before him. "You fancy your tongue is skilled. If I find it satisfying, then you live."

Without a word, the youth leaned down and took his master's soft cock into his mouth, pushing the foreskin back with his lips, swirling his tongue around it slowly, then allowing it to slide out, his lips taking over. Kronos lay back on his elbows, not moving, watching the servant before him work for his life. His cock began to harden considerably as the youth took it back into his mouth, grazing it slightly with his teeth as he moved up and down the shaft. Moving to the head, he ran his tongue underneath the now swollen head and sucked on it alone. Kronos groaned and lay back, reaching for his servant's long hair. He took a handful and pushed the youth down onto his fully erect cock. The youth choked as the head hit the back of his throat, and Kronos began to thrust, the youth's throat muscles convulsing tightly around him. Kronos came in great waves, the youth forced to swallow all of him as Kronos ground the youth's head into his groin.

The youth licked him clean, and gently crawled on top of Kronos. Tears were streaming down his face. "Please, master," he begged, biting his lip.

Kronos pulled him up closer, drawing him into a kiss. He turned them onto their sides and allowed the youth to rub his erection against his hard stomach until his servant finally reached orgasm in great, shuddering waves. Kronos held his ass tight, squeezing viciously as the youth was lost in relief. The youth slumped against him, their bodies wet with sweat and the youth's release. "Always take

what you can get," Kronos whispered into his ear, and reached for his sword.

"I...I thought I pleased you," the youth squeaked.

"Oh, you live," Kronos assured him, cutting his bonds. "We have much to do."



Amanda stopped in the entrance to the hotel bar, simultaneously scanning the dominantly European occupants and allowing her presence to be felt. She quickly slipped out of her psychedelic blazer and hung it on a coat hook. Even the dimmed lights in the bar failed to extinguish the scandalous hot pink miniskirt she wore, topped with a bright orange blouse, its frilly collar dipping low. Her white, knee-high patent leather boots completed the swinging ensemble. She raised one hand and ran it through her straight, strawberry-blonde, waist-length hair as she undulated into the loud crowd.

Winding her way to the bar, she expertly slid onto a stool, crossing one lithe leg seductively over the other. "Oh, bar keep," she cooed to the native pouring cocktails. "I've heard you make the best martinis in Algiers," Amanda said, batting her eyes. She kept the smile firmly in place while surveying the room in the large mirror behind the bottled booze. Her eyes glided quickly from face to face, desperately searching for her missed contact. Three tedious days, two dye jobs, and a gender-switch — all for a simple diamond heist, made impossible without the insider.

Where was the man? She cursed him silently, smiling even more widely as the bartender informed her the soldier at the end of the bar had purchased her drink. Amanda turned politely to thank her benefactor, and was pleasantly surprised to find a very handsome, very British officer lifting his martini her way. *Well, perhaps this day isn't a total loss*, she thought, as she motioned for the bartender to move her drink to the end of the bar. She smoothed her skirt a fraction lower as she walked, and almost fell as she felt the presence of another immortal invade her senses.

She quickly looked past the officer to the entrance. A young man, obviously a native, stood stock still, perplexed. He turned his head quickly right, then left, then turned in a circle, finally coming to a halt staring into the bar. An ancient woman, her entire figure bent under her black robes, hung on to the young man's arm, gripping him tightly. Amanda tensed as his eyes finally met hers and locked. He was not yet twenty, she thought, but incredibly alluring. High cheekbones, prominent nose, squared chin, and sparkling brown eyes. She nodded her head to him, and he bowed his lean frame in return. Upon rising, he lowered his eyes toward the hag at his side, then raised them back to Amanda. He slightly bent his head toward the hotel elevators. Amanda raised her eyebrows, and the young man smiled wider, then winked. She looked at him coyly, judging, then quickly nodded her head.

Quickly draining her drink, she made a quick apology to the young, disappointed officer. Amanda slipped into her blazer, feeling her sword safely tucked away at her side, and let her senses scan the lobby for the tempting Immortal. She found him at the very edge of her range, then saw him, gesturing for her to follow as he led the old woman at his side toward the back of the building. Her curiosity piqued, she followed coolly, trying to determine their destination. Something didn't feel quite right, she decided. But most natives did use the back entrances, she decided, as she passed more Algerians in the hallway. And if he were to rid himself of the ancient woman's claws, then certainly he would have to use the back door. *Get a hold of yourself, old girl*, she thought. She remembered how curiosity in his eyes had been instantly replaced by sensuality. She shivered as she walked out the back door, already anticipating the connection with him, another of her kind.

There she found him, leaning against a wall, waiting for her to emerge. Amanda noticed how sure this immortal was, a good sign. Amateur night had its kicks, but there was something to be said for an experienced man of a thousand or so years. He stood beside a doorway leading to a closed shop, the old woman sitting on the ground in the darkness, her head slumped against the wall. She walked down the road slowly, allowing him to appreciate her finer points. As she neared, he walked forward and bowed. "Your beauty is a

flower upon the desert of my soul," he said to her silkily.

"Compliments will get you everywhere," she purred, holding out a hand, which he took and kissed. "I am Amanda."

"And I am your servant, lovely one," he said, smiling. He gently placed her hand on his arm, drawing her closer. "I have seen many wonders in this world, but you are truly a beauty to be reckoned with."

She smiled into his eyes. "You are too kind, but I'm not complaining."

"What brings a woman of the world, such as yourself, to this lonely outpost of a city?" he asked conversationally.

"I've never been to Africa before," Amanda said, truthfully. "And I've heard there are plenty of opportunities if one just looks in the right places."

"You have heard correctly, but it is growing late, and the street is much too unsafe," he said suddenly as a black limousine pulled up to the curb. He let go of her and walked to the long vehicle, opening the door for her. "Let us find a safer place to finish our conversation."

She paused and frowned, her survival instincts suddenly racing. Something was out of place again. "What about your..." Amanda tried to speak, but a sword appeared at her throat from behind, a strong arm around her waist holding her in place.

"Worried about little old me?" a melodious voice chuckled into her ear. "How quaint. Your seeming respect for your elders is noted."

Amanda's eyes went wide as she realized the young Algerian patiently holding the door was not immortal. She quickly relaxed in her captor's arms, preparing to slip from his grasp, but found herself being thrown toward the car. Before she could gain any balance, she was thrown further into the vehicle, where six men in black robes awaited her. As the men struggled to hold down the thrashing woman, Amanda looked back over her shoulder in time to see Kronos, the black robes discarded, his

sword on his shoulder, smiling in triumph as the door slammed shut and the limo sped away.



Amanda heard the muffled clip of footfalls on the stone floor coming near her. Hearing was the only sense she seemed to still possess. She was blind, her naked body entirely covered in a heavy black cloth, a rope in turn tied firmly around her neck. Her hands were tied to the rope around her neck, and were hoisted into the air over a pulley — if she tried to pull her hands downward, she choked herself. Amanda's bare feet barely reached the floor, where chains bound her ankles.

She felt the Immortal before he entered the room, another set of footsteps whispering along with him. *That would be the young Algerian*, she thought. He would be her target. *Just as soon as I can draw him aside.* "Some things never change," she said aloud, voice even, keeping calm. She waited, but neither man responded with so much as a shuffle. "Same old song and dance," she tried again, a bit of tiredness creeping into her inflection. Still nothing. "Master and servant game again?"

Amanda heard liquid being poured from a glass and swallowed, realizing she was thirsty. Then someone gulped the drink, most likely the Immortal. She tried to shift her weight a bit, her arms beginning to tingle painfully. "You know, gentlemen, I like to have as much fun as the next girl does. If you could just loosen these ropes a bit, I promise to be a good girl and show you how much I appreciate your kindness." Her voice dripped with innuendo, and she sucked in her breath when she heard a slight moan. She turned her head toward the sound and was rewarded with the unmistakable sound of wet lips joining and parting. *Damn.*

The men's breathing became rushed, a throaty moan drifting toward her. Amanda could feel her blood begin to boil. How dare they!? Using a mortal to lure her away from a perfectly good sailor was the first insult. Worse, she had slipped, not recognizing the Immortal for what he was. Worst of all, she decided as the younger of the two gasped aloud, that they kept her prisoner and ignored her! *Why, I'll show them*, she thought, attempting again to

slide her wrists through the ropes. *And just wait 'til I find my sword! First, I'll cut off his...."*

"I don't suppose you've ever been with a woman?" Kronos asked his servant, leaving the young man on the pillows beside the table. Their robes lay on the floor where they had been dropped. Kronos walked to the wall and hefted his sword, spinning it easily in his hand.

"I have not," the servant replied, breathing hard. His master had left him abruptly, left him aching for his experienced touch.

"I, on the other hand, have possessed many," Kronos replied without emotion.

"Are they all different?" the servant asked, rising to stand behind his master. He placed his hand softly at the base of the Immortal's spine and slid his open palm up his master's back, then over a shoulder, bringing their bodies firmly together.

"I suppose," Kronos said. "But basically they're all the same."



Amanda opened her eyes wide, fear beginning to insinuate itself inside her. This was an old Immortal — twice her age, if not more. She couldn't fool him and survive — she would be headless before any of her tricks would work on this one. Concentrate on the young one, she repeated to herself. Concentrate. Perhaps she was meant as a gift, a toy for the young man.

"Women, you see, are never as they appear. They use dyes and paints to masquerade before you, girdles and cloth to further trick the eye," Kronos said disparagingly. "Strip away their facade and watch them wilt."

"But this one is very beautiful, for a woman," the youth answered, leaning to place his cheek on the back of his master's shoulder.

"She is like me," Kronos replied softly, smiling. "We shall always be as you see us now."

Amanda held her tongue, attempting to memorize every voice inflection, attempting to squeeze out the most meager information to help her survive. Again the men were embracing, a low growl coming from the Immortal.

"Do you wish to look upon her?" Kronos asked, his servant pulled hard into an embrace, his teeth ravaging the youth's long neck.

"I do," the youth muttered meekly, not willing to stop his master's attentions just yet.

Kronos stopped his assault. He walked the boy closer to the bound figure and stopped him, placing his fingers to his lips, calling for silence. He raised his sword, the point resting near the top of Amanda's thighs. He sliced quickly, the front of the drape falling to the floor, revealing her long, slender legs, straining to keep herself from choking.

"Her legs are much different from ours," she heard the youth say, as if he were examining a specimen under glass.

"Oh quite," Kronos agreed, circling the figure. "And though they seem thinner, do not be fooled by their appearance. This one has the legs of an acrobat — whipcord strong. She could kill you easily, you know." His servant looked at him in confusion. "Oh yes. And I'm sure this one has used the technique before. While you are enjoying her fruits, your head firmly between her lovely thighs, she simply wraps her legs around your head and jerks firmly, snapping your neck cleanly." Kronos laughed, his servant turning pale. He stepped closer to his captive, judging where an ear might be. "You know, I've used that method myself!" he told her, chuckling at her silence.

Kronos stood back aimed his sword just under Amanda's breasts, and cut an inverted V, the drape falling away to show her torso but still hiding her bust. Amanda gasped as the sword nicked her under her left breast, blood beginning to flow down her body. Kronos watched his servant closely as he stepped forward and knelt before her. "May I, master?" the youth asked, watching the blood trickle down.

"Only as I've taught you." Kronos stood transfixed

as he watched his servant clasp his hands behind his back, then lean forward with his tongue to trace the blood back to its source. By the time the youth had moved up her body, the wound was gone.

"Her skin is smoother than a man's," the servant replied, his face nuzzling Amanda's flat stomach just above her mound. "And she smells very different," he said, lowering his nose toward her pubic hair.

"Enough," Kronos ordered hoarsely. "Get me wine."

Amanda tried to quietly regain some equilibrium as the young man left her. While the nick had been painful, the surprising warmth and wetness of the servant's tongue brought her body alive again. And the pain with it. Her shoulders now ached, her arms beginning to droop, the constriction on her throat drawing closer. Her calf muscles were threatening to spasm. If she couldn't free herself quickly, she would die in front of them.

Kronos tipped the glass the youth brought to him and offered the last sip to his servant. He held the glass for the boy and controlled the flow so it trickled into the boy's waiting mouth. Kronos took the final swallow and kissed the youth quickly, sharing the last sip, wine spilling between their lips. The servant broke off quickly and began to lick the wine from his master's chest, hesitating at a nipple, waiting for a drop to hit his tongue. "There again is how a woman is different," Kronos said, stroking the youth's head, running his fingers through his long brown hair. "Her chest is her greatest enemy." Kronos walked away from the servant and lifted his sword, cutting the garment just below Amanda's neck. Now only her face remained covered.

The servant looked surprised. "They are much different than I had imagined," he said, beginning to laugh.

"And every woman has a set totally different from her sister's before her," Kronos said, smiling. "I have seen many a good man lose his fortune and power to gaze at a sight such as this," Kronos said, gently lifting a breast with his sword. "While they lure a fool to pleasure, these oversized glands do not aid their mistress in battle. And just like every

other part of her, these begin to sag and wrinkle in old age, becoming grotesque finally." Amanda choked, her shoulders sagging, the weight of her dead arms pulling the noose tightly around her throat. Kronos stepped back and slid an arm around the youth's waist. They watched silently as she died, her legs gone slack.

"And they die just like everyone else," Kronos said, his eyes sparkling. "Move her body to the bed."



Amanda gasped back to life, sucking air deep into her lungs. She tried to rise, but a weight on her waist kept her firmly pinned down. Instead, she instantly took stock of her situation — she lay face down on a bed, naked, her arms bound in soft fabric, wound tight up to her shoulders and tied firmly to two bedposts. She tried to rise again and the weight shifted.

"Going somewhere?" Kronos asked. He sat on her ass, naked as well, straddling her. "Have you missed a business meeting, perhaps?"

Amanda grimaced. "Well, if you must know, yes," she said, exasperated. "You and your little game have cost me a pretty penny." She felt the tip of a blade make contact with the middle of her back, and she stopped breathing.

Kronos snorted, pressing his dagger menacingly against her skin. "Cost you, did I? Why, you don't know how expensive I can be. Oh, but I've forgotten. 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend,' but in this case, I think your friends have let you down."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Amanda lied.

"Of course you do," Kronos cooed. "You came into this country under a male's alias, then quickly changed into your usual self, although the first time you wore black hair. You called your contact, Sheik Ali — a common if not imaginative alias — to arrange the heist of the Prince of Senegal's jewel collection, which was displayed at the Royal Palace as of yesterday, but is now en route to its next stop." Kronos watched his captive while he repeated her

activities, satisfied to see resignation on her face. "I believe your plan was to hijack the carrier, correct?"

Amanda nodded her head. "Sounds like you knew what I was going to do before I did."

"I did, that's the beauty of it," Kronos laughed. "What you didn't understand ahead of time, of course, was that this city belongs to me. No Immortal walks in Algiers unless I give my permission. And no petty theft is allowed, unless I give the orders."

"And little ole me without a note from my mother," Amanda said sarcastically.

Kronos pressed the blade into her back, drawing a line of blood and a gasp. "You certainly gamble your head freely. You live only because of my generosity."

"Oh, I do appreciate the first-class treatment and wonderful tour of the city," she laughed.

"Not my generosity toward you, you slut," Kronos growled, replacing his knife with his chest, rubbing his balls against her ass. "My servant reached the age of adulthood without experiencing a woman's body. While I find other pleasures intensely more satisfying, he should have a well-rounded education. It is for his benefit only that I didn't possess your quickening in the street."

"And I'll thank him properly, too," Amanda said, her mind racing. "The young man really should have a full working knowledge, and I can certainly give him that, but it would be so much easier, and so much more satisfying, if I had the use of my hands."

Kronos bit her ear and laughed into it. "And so much easier for you to attempt to take my head," he mimicked her. "You insult me," he said, rising from her body. He watched as she stretched, realizing her legs were loosely bound. "I shall ignore it for now. Teach my servant properly, and I'll consider allowing you to live."

He clapped twice and his servant appeared at his side. Kronos turned to him and started, the face was so familiar. He carefully reached for the youth,

drew him near, holding him in his arms. Silently, he reached up and explored that face, the sparkling brown eyes watching him closely. His lips met eager lips, so eager to please. He trailed the kiss down to the youth's neck, then whispered into his ear, "Have I always taught you well?"

"Yes, Master," the youth agreed, stretching his head back, baring his throat.

"Then you must listen closely to me now," Kronos continued, running one hand through his servant's long hair. "I will instruct you on the ways of women." Kronos pulled away and walked toward the bed, motioning the youth to follow. Kronos picked up his sword near the foot of the bed. He tapped one of Amanda's cheeks with it. "Turn onto your side," he ordered.

"And just how am I supposed to do that?" she shot back.

Kronos smiled. "Lesson Number One. Women rarely ever obey the first time," and he turned his blade and spanked her, hard. She yelped, and began to struggle onto her side. "When given proper motivation, women will almost invariably obey the second time." Kronos turned to his servant and waved his arm toward the bed. The servant crawled onto the bed and onto his side, facing Amanda. Kronos, in turn, positioned himself behind her.

"We meet again," Amanda said, eyeing the youth. He was almost as tall as she, lean but strong with a well muscled chest. His large eyes spoke to her of passion, his body responding as well. She rested her eyes on his growing erection. "In your case, clothes certainly don't make the man." The young man smiled back at her.

Kronos raised up on one elbow, unhappy with the youth's response. He spanked her again, this time with his open palm. "Quiet, you!" he ordered. "Lesson Number Two. Keep their mouths occupied at all times, or they will talk you out of your senses, and any other item of yours they desire. Now, show me how you would keep this one quiet."

The youth looked uncertainly at his master, then back down to the woman before him. He slid closer to her, slowly moving his lips to hers, never closing

his eyes. Amanda met his lips eagerly, her eyes half closed, watching his response as she slid her tongue into his mouth. The servant sucked on it eagerly, then crushed his mouth to hers. Amanda shivered as she felt a breath of air on her neck, then her ear, as Kronos leaned over her body to intimately scrutinize the kiss.

"Talented, isn't he?" Kronos grinned at her, as he lowered himself toward their lips. His tongue darted out and began to lap at their union, tongues intertwining. He reached across and moved the youth closer to Amanda, pressing her body hard between them.

The youth broke the kiss suddenly and shot upwards, capturing his master's mouth for a moment. "So different," he mumbled as he let go.

"Yes," Kronos whispered back. "Now, you have left her mouth open. You must fill it, but not with your mouth this time."

"What do you suggest, Master?" the youth asked, settling back down onto the bed. He hesitantly reached out and began to fondle Amanda's breasts, her nipples growing hard between his fingers.

"Listen to your needs, what your body craves," Kronos said, alternately stroking his servant's thigh, then Amanda's. "Tell me what you want."

"I want her to suck me," the youth said, watching as Amanda's tongue snaked out to lick her lips. Kronos grabbed her roughly and turned her onto her back. She cried out as the bonds cut into her arms. The youth looked questioningly at his master. "Do I mount her facing forward first, or the opposite direction?"

Kronos remained still on the bed, eyes sparkling. "Why not try both?"

The youth nodded and raised himself over Amanda, straddling her. Quickly, Kronos mounted behind him and encircled his servant's waist with his hands. He leaned sideways to get a better view and to instruct his pupil. "Lean forward, yes, that's it," he said, watching as the youth moved forward, dropping toward Amanda's waiting mouth. He reached lower and took his servant's erection in his

hand, lowering it to her lips. "Now pleasure him," he ordered.

Amanda wet her lips again, moving her head side to side, brushing her lips across the head of the youth's cock. She slid her tongue out to encircle the sensitive tip, then began to engulf it fully as Kronos urged his servant's body down lower. Amanda watched as Kronos began to pump the shaft slowly while she sucked him in deeper, their eyes locking. She shivered under the onslaught of his intensity and closed her eyes. She gagged in surprise as Kronos released his servant and shoved him down her throat.

The youth cried out as his entire length was engulfed in the wet warmth, his breath turning ragged. Kronos leaned over him, kissing his back, biting the youth's soft sides, trailing his tongue back to his ass. "How does she feel?" he asked between bites. The boy remained motionless in her mouth, content to feel her tongue swirling around his cock. Kronos chuckled as he wet a finger, inserting it into the youth's tense ass. He was rewarded with a sharp intake of air, and as he added another finger, his servant moaned. "Now fuck her mouth." The youth needed no prompting; as Kronos finger fucked him, he pumped against the back of her throat, release coming quickly.

Rather than catch his breath, the youth left the bed quickly, not saying a word. Kronos rolled on top of her and brutally kissed her, bruising her mouth. He pulled away from her as she gasped for air. He leered down at her. "I can still taste him." He brought one hand up to cup one of her breasts, then ran his fingers up to squeeze the nipple. She shifted under him in pain, then once again closed her eyes, his stare too much for her. She heard the boy approach, and opened her eyes. He carried a large bowl with towels on his arms. Kronos crawled off her and met the youth at her feet. Kronos ordered his servant onto the bed, took a rag from him, dipped it into the water, and began to painstakingly clean him.

When he finished, he took another rag and handed it to the youth. "Lesson Number Three. As you noticed earlier, women and men are made very differently. Now you must learn **how** differently. Begin by washing her thoroughly." Kronos quickly

spread Amanda's legs until she cried out, the bonds biting in. "That's right. Part the lips just so...yes, that's good enough."

Not hesitating, the youth dropped his towel and mounted Amanda backwards, more used to the position, lowering his softened cock to her lips. He lowered his body over hers, his nose gently nuzzling the heart-shaped body of pubic hair. Kronos knelt between her legs, lowering his head onto her thigh, avidly watching his servant. The youth smiled at his master and licked his lips. "I want to taste her."

Kronos turned his head and licked her thigh. "Did you notice, in between her lips, there was something small, almost like the bud of a rose?" The servant nodded his head and closed his eyes as Amanda's tongue excited him. "That is the focal point of a woman's passion," Kronos explained lazily.

The youth gasped as Amanda increased her ministrations, and Kronos in turn bit her thigh, causing her to moan and squirm. "Treat it like you would a man's cock, as you do mine. You will receive the same reaction." His servant leaned over and brushed his master's lips, causing him to shudder. Then he lowered his head between her thighs.

Fear fled from Amanda as the youth's agile tongue began to lick her clit. Kronos' fierceness retreated from her mind as she pressed herself closer to the servant's waiting mouth, only his cock and his tongue important now. He moved his hips upward, allowing just the head to remain in her mouth. She sucked on it eagerly, and he mimicked her motions, sucking on her clit. She gasped around the head, and nibbled the shaft with her lips. The servant gently nibbled her button, then licked her with the flat of his tongue. She groaned in frustration as his mouth suddenly left her.

"Am I doing this correctly, master?" the servant asked innocently, panting.

Kronos stifled his laughter. "Let me see," he said and leaned over, kissing the youth. He broke from his servant and buried his own face in Amanda's wet cunt. He bit her quickly, then thrust his tongue

inside her. She bucked against him, and he withdrew as quickly, enjoying the moment. "You are a natural."

The youth smiled back at him. "A man and a woman come together to make children. I have been taught that. Will you show me?" he asked between gasps as Amanda began to suck him in earnest.

Kronos nodded, and guided the youth's mouth to his waiting cock. "I will show you, but you must assist me." The servant took his master into his mouth and quickly hardened him. He knew just where to nibble, where to suck. "A man must be firm to enter a woman, just as I must be firm to enter you," Kronos said, his breathing growing rapid. "The woman must also be wet. She will create her own moisture if she is aroused, as this one has. But it is not always so." Kronos gently removed his servant's mouth from his throbbing erection. The youth's face was flushed, his hips beginning to move slowly up and down over Amanda's mouth.

"Here, just below her clit, is an opening," Kronos said as he lowered the head of his penis towards her. "Once you have located it," he said, rushed, "you enter her." Amanda's muffled yelp reached them as Kronos buried himself in her on the first thrust. "I shall withdraw, and allow you to enter," he said to his servant, swallowing hard.

His servant reached out and grabbed his master's thigh with one hand, the other hand balancing himself, "Show me more," he said, groaning, moving his head toward his master's buried erection. His own arousal straining to be fulfilled, the servant gently lowered his body to rest upon Amanda, his cock once again grazing her throat.

Kronos slowly moved his cock out of her cunt, just allowing the head to stay in, then thrust hard back into her. He watched mesmerized as his servant bent his head lower and began to lick them, first his master's cock as it appeared from her opening, then the captive's clit. The sensation of being fucked and licked was too much for Amanda; she opened her mouth wide around his cock and cried out as orgasm racked her, the servant only quickening his strokes on her clit as she writhed against them. Kronos plunged into her mercilessly, driven by the sight and feel of his servant's tongue and her

tightening muscles. He growled in the back of his throat as he shot into her, his servant finally gaining release with his master.

And then she was alone. The bed was empty, there was no sound again. "Hey, that's not fair," she panted.

She strained to raise her head a bit to look around the room. The men stood at the end of bed, sharing a gentle kiss. Kronos allowed the youth to leave and advanced toward the bed.

Kronos' glare was cold as he neared her side. "Rule Number Four: never leave anything unfinished." Amanda could see a pistol in his hand, elongated by a silencer on the end.

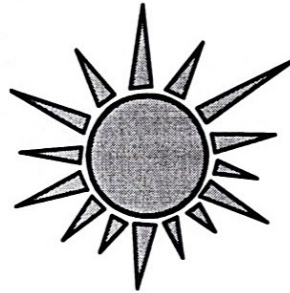
Amanda's eyes went wide. "You said I could live if I taught him well!" she pleaded. "Are you not a man of your word?"

"Oh, you shall live," Kronos said, sitting on the bed next to her. "But not here. Understand this: first, you will never attempt to see my servant," he said, his voice deep, the threat obvious. He lowered himself over her, his nose just inches from hers. "Second, you will not enter this city again as long as it's mine," he continued, grinning wickedly, bringing the pistol between her breasts, "and third, don't give up your day job."



ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS SAY, SUNSHINE

By **KayCee**



Doyle leaned on the buzzer of Bodie's flat for the second time, waiting for Bodie to answer the intercom. The nasty thing remained stubbornly silent.

Where the hell is the bloody sod anyway? His car was at the curb, so I know he's there. He'd said he didn't have any plans when he'd asked Doyle to come for a drink earlier that evening, but at that point, Doyle still thought he'd had a date with the luscious, but temperamental, Claire.

Unfortunately, the date hadn't come off after all. Claire called at the last moment and told him to forget it — she had a better offer and would not be seeing him anymore. She could have canceled earlier, but Doyle knew he'd stood her up one too many times and she'd just waited for a bit of revenge.

He'd been all dressed up with no place to go. Knowing that Bodie would commiserate with him, he'd changed into comfortable jeans and headed for his best mate's flat. It had happened to Bodie often enough in the past.

Well, where is he?

Doyle knew Bodie wouldn't have gone anywhere without calling Central to let them know, and he'd called before coming by to make sure that Bodie

was still at home. So where the hell was he? An inspiration struck; he hit the buzzer of the old lady next door to Bodie and she was more than happy to let him in. He climbed the stairs to Bodie's flat two at a time and then pounded loudly on the door. Doyle waited a couple of seconds, then pounded again.

Surely Bodie is going to answer the door. He'd better open up soon or I'll have to break it down and Cowley'd just love that. The cheap old man would probably make me pay for it, too.

Just as he was beginning to wonder if something was really wrong, the door opened.

"What?" Bodie demanded, looking a bit rumpled, wearing a steel grey tracksuit, old and worn, totally unlike the suave creature who'd left him a few hours ago.

"That any way to greet a mate?" Doyle asked, pushing past him into the flat, wondering why Bodie was being sarky. He wasn't the one whose date had stood him up at the last moment.

"Do come in." Bodie's voice was cold as ice and dripping with sarcasm.

"Thanks, I will," Doyle came back with the standard reply. "Why'd it take you so long to answer the

door? In the loo or something?" Their normal bantering was off kilter; Doyle was starting to get concerned about why Bodie was in such a bad mood.

"Or something. Did it ever occur to you that I might not have wanted company?" Bodie snarled, bad tempered, his blue eyes flashing.

Doyle shook his head. "No."

"Well, I don't."

"Why not? You wanted to go out before."

"Yeah, but you were too busy," Bodie said, following Doyle into the sitting room.

Something in his tone spoke of hurt, but Doyle couldn't imagine what might be wrong or why Bodie sounded like that. "Had a date with Claire."

"What did she do, dump you?"

Doyle shrugged and sighed. "Yeah, about five minutes before I was going to leave to pick her up."

"Too bad." Bodie didn't sound at all sympathetic; in fact, he sounded as if he was annoyed.

"What's wrong?" Doyle asked, looking around the sitting room.

Something wasn't right. It took a couple of seconds to put his finger on what it was: several things missing from their usual places. The framed picture of the two of them in front of the Capri was gone from the bookcase in the corner, along with some, but not all, of the books. It looked as if only select books had been pulled out. Bodie's favorite book of poetry was gone — the one he didn't even admit to owning. The afghan that he'd got Bodie for Christmas one year was also missing from its place on the back of the sofa.

Not that the thing matched the sofa anyway, Doyle mused. It was done in dark blue yarns and the sofa was rusty orange. The colours could have gone

together if the shades were right, but they were just off enough to make the two items clash horribly. Ray didn't understand why Bodie insisted on putting it on the sofa anyway.

A prickle of concern slid down Doyle's spine. He was starting to get a bad feeling about this. "What going on?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing," Bodie replied, not meeting his eyes for the first time since Ray had known him.

Another really bad sign, Doyle decided, looking around again.. Bodie was almost fanatically neat, and everything was still in its place, but he could feel the tension in his partner. Something was wrong.

He turned toward Bodie's bedroom. The door was closed. Bodie never closed the door to his bedroom; even when he was having it off with a bird, the door remained open. Doyle started for it.

"Don't go in there," Bodie ordered, starting to step into his path.

Doyle ignored him, sidestepping around Bodie to get to the door first. He wrenched it open, expecting resistance and finding none; it slapped against the wall.

Stepping inside the room, he was shocked to see he'd obviously interrupted Bodie in the process of packing. There was a zipped suitcase on the floor and another open one on the bed; the drawers all stood open and the cupboard was bare.

An icy wave of shock crashed over him, making him feel sick to his stomach and hot and cold at the same time. Bodie was leaving — Bodie was leaving *him*! He couldn't believe it; *what did I do?*

He turned back toward Bodie, tears stinging his eyes, tears he vowed Bodie would not see fall.

"Why?" he queried, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Time to move on," Bodie said, shrugging his

shoulders and still refusing to meet Doyle's eyes.

"Just like that?" Ray demanded, anger at Bodie's callous tone seeping into him, replacing the hurt and shock.

"Yeah, I got a job in Paris waiting for me."

"What about CI5 and the Squad? Have you told Cowley? What did he say about the month's notice?"

"Was going to drop the car off and leave him a note on my way out of town."

Doyle simply could not credit what he was hearing. This wasn't the same person who'd been his partner for the last four years. "I can't believe you'd do that. Just leave, without a word to anyone, without telling me. How can you do that?"

"Seasy. I've been doing it all my life."

"I thought the squad and Cowley meant something to you," Doyle accused. "I thought *I* meant something to you!" He made a conscious effort to lower his voice. "Didn't any of it mean anything to you?"

"Some of it."

"Then how can you leave?" Doyle persisted; he wasn't going to let Bodie go — not without an explanation, and he might not let him go even then.

"Doyle," Bodie pleaded. "I have to go, don't you understand, I have to."

"No. I won't let you go." Doyle crossed his arms over his chest and widened his stance. "You have no choice, so you'd better tell me why."

Bodie made a move as if might he might be going towards Doyle, but then he sighed and shook his head. "I told you, it's time to move on. I've got better things to do that sit around baby-sitting an ex-copper like you."

Doyle drew a sharp breath, but said nothing. Bodie was trying to be hurtful, trying to make him angry enough to step aside and let him leave. "Won't work, sunshine." Doyle smiled his most charming grin. "I know you're lying about it being time to move on. So tell me the truth."

"What makes you so sure I'm lying?" Bodie evaded. His tone and inflection tried to make it sound like it didn't matter, but Doyle knew better.

Not answering, Doyle just stood his ground, waiting for Bodie to tell him the truth.

Instead, Bodie turned away.

"Don't you dare think to go anywhere," Doyle growled with as much menace as he could muster.

"You can't leave well enough alone, can you Doyle?" Bodie sounded as if he was steeling himself against something painful, but his tone was cold.

"No." That was absolutely out of the question.

"Fine." Bodie turned back to look at Doyle; his dark blue eyes pinned Doyle to the wall. "I'm in love with you, have been for years and I just can't live with it anymore. So I'm getting out while I still can." Bodie took a deep breath and went on, "What's more, sunshine" he made the word sound coarse and insulting, where it had always been a term of affection between them — "I have always wanted to fuck you rigid and unless you're gone in ten seconds I'm going take my fantasy out on your arse, I promise you." Bodie could sound damned hard and cold when he wanted to and right then he really wanted to. The effect was ruined when his voice broke on the last word.

Ray was devastated by the pain in Bodie's soft voice and by the simple knowledge of how Bodie felt about him — that Bodie loved him. He'd always known Bodie was attracted to him, catching a stray glance now and then. It had always flattered him that Bodie thought him good-looking, but he'd never really considered it went farther than simple

attraction. Wanting to kick himself for never realizing it went as far as love, Doyle castigated himself. *How could I be so blind? So unaware?*

"You really want to fuck me?" Doyle asked softly, knowing he would give his partner anything he needed, including this.

Having seen Bodie's attraction to him long ago, he'd decided that if Bodie asked, he'd give over. How could he refuse the other man, someone who put his life on the line for Ray on a daily basis? He couldn't tell Bodie that while he'd allow him to die for Ray, making love was too much to ask.

"Yeah, Doyle. I really want to fuck you," Bodie whispered in an almost reverent tone — a far cry from the tone he'd used the first time he'd said those words.

"Okay," Doyle agreed, slipping off his jacket and tossing it over the big, brown leather chair in the corner of the bedroom. His shoulder holster followed and he'd started to unbutton the cuffs of his flannel shirt when Bodie's big hand clamped over his wrist.

"Wait! What did you say?"

"I said, okay," Doyle repeated and then added for good measure, so there would be no misunderstandings later, "you can fuck me."

Bodie looked as if he was going to choke; his mouth opened and closed and then opened again; no sound came out.

Bodie really does that fish imitation very well.

"I don't understand," Bodie whispered, confusion pouring from his blue eyes.

"What part of 'yes' didn't you understand, sunshine? I thought I'd made myself pretty clear."

"You're not gay. Are you?"

Poor Bodie looked very young and uncertain, right

then; the look squeezed at Doyle's heart.

How do I reassure him? Doyle wondered. *He obviously wanted this too much to believe he would get it. What should I do?*

Deciding on the truth, Doyle said, "Not the last time I checked. But I'll have to think about it a bit more seriously from now on, won't I?"

"Then why?" Bodie folded his arms across his chest in a completely defensive posture.

"Jesus Christ, Bodie, when you're willing to die for someone, sex doesn't really seem like that big a deal. If you want me, I'll give over."

Bodie was doing his fish imitation again. "I never thought of it that way."

"I've had some time to think about it," Doyle said.

"You knew how I felt?"

"Seen the way you look at me sometimes; I knew you were attracted to me. I didn't know how deep it went, but I always thought that if you asked, I'd go along with it."

"Why?"

"You're my partner."

"That's the whole reason?"

"Bodie, what other reason do I need?"

"A better one than that to go from a totally straight guy to a gay one."

"Bi," Doyle pointed out, smiling and trying to lighten things up a bit. Bodie wasn't having any of it.

"Whatever," Bodie growled, nastily. "It's not enough reason to do it."

"Sure it is, but that's not the only reason. I care

about you!"

"But you don't love me." The blue eyes were filled with such pain; Doyle just wanted to make it better.

"I do love you, as a mate, partner. I'd die for you, Bodie. Sleeping with you won't be a chore, I promise you."

"You've thought about this, really?"

"Yeah, I have."

"Have I been so very obvious?"

"Nah, just to someone who knows you really well, like I do." Doyle moved his hand down to the front of his shirt and started to unbutton it. When he'd completed the task, he peeled the sweaty shirt off, throwing it over the chair with his jacket and gun. He fluffed the damp chest hair for a second and then turned toward the bed. The open suitcase was still lying there; Ray tossed it on the floor, disrupting its contents.

"Hey," Bodie complained. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking off my clothes. I have it on good authority making love works better when you're naked." Despite his casual, indulgent tone, Ray was just a bit nervous and Bodie wasn't helping, just standing there, looking stunned. Doyle sat down on the bed and began to untie his trainers.

Bodie didn't seem to want to believe that Ray'd really let him do it, but he would. *What is the big deal*, he wondered. Sex was sex; both he and Bodie had more experience than most men had a right to have, some of it good and some of it bad, but most of it loveless. Bodie loved him and he loved Bodie, perhaps not in the same way, but surely the tremendous affection he held for the other man would make sex between them good.

And Ray knew, absolutely knew, that Bodie would die before hurting him willingly — the last few moments aside; those were the acts of a desperate man. He wondered if Bodie would actually have

left, when push came to shove; it didn't matter, he guessed, not in the long run.

Intellectually, Ray understood that men had been fucking each other since time began and that there was likely a lot of pleasure in the act, but he wasn't as sure of himself as he was trying to lead Bodie to believe. He understood the mechanics of male/male sex — what copper who'd ever been on the streets didn't? But he felt the lack of practical experience keenly. Wanting this to go right for both of them, he wished fervently he knew more about it.

"Bodie?" Doyle smiled up at him as he deposited his sock on top of his trainer and reached for the other one. "Come on, sunshine, I'm giving you what you want. Aren't you going to take advantage of it?"

Wrong choice of words, Doyle saw immediately as Bodie stiffened. "No, Doyle, get dressed," Bodie ordered. "I don't want this! I'm *not* a mercy fuck!"

"You dumb crud, that's not what this is about!" Doyle yelled, standing up and putting his hands on his hips. "There's no one else in the fucking world I'd do this for." He took a breath. "I love you."

Bodie looked pole-axed. "Don't, please," he whispered, backing away until his back was pressed against the bedroom wall.

"Bodie, you're my best friend and I'm yours, right?" He moved to stand in front of Bodie, waiting until the other man nodded.

"Well, if you could give me something that would make me really happy you would, right?"

"Yeah," Bodie replied very cautiously.

"Well, so would I." Doyle put his hands on Bodie's shoulders. "This will make you happy and keep you with me, at my side. It's not such a big deal."

Bodie exploded, knocking Doyle's hands off his shoulders and pushing him away. "That's just it, you berk. To me it is a big deal, to me... I've wanted you for so long without any hope of having you —

and in you come — going to give Bodie what he wants, big sacrifice, mercy fuck. You are so fucking causal about this. It doesn't mean anything to you."

"Course it means something to me! I would not even consider doing this with anyone else in the world. I care about you. I have thought this through. I know what it means to both of us." Doyle sat back down on the bed.

"I'd rather leave and never have you than have your pity."

"Told you before it's not pity. It's friendship and affection. Didn't you ever have a nice fuck between friends? What about all that time in Africa?"

"It's not the same and you know it."

"It is."

"No. I'll likely die if I have you once and then never again," Bodie ground out through clenched teeth, his fists tightly at his sides.

"Who said anything about it being a one-off?" Doyle asked, knowing Bodie would need more than that. He wasn't sure he was up for exclusive promises quite yet, at least not before Bodie'd delivered the goods, but he knew going in this would not be a one-time thing.

"You mean you'd want to have a relationship with me?"

"It's not as if we don't already have one." Standing, Doyle pulled his belt through the loops, tossing it carelessly on the top of the stack of his clothes.

"Not like that!"

"Like what?" Doyle undid the top snap of his jeans. Lowering the zip, he started to shimmy out of the tight trousers.

Bodie's bellow startled him. "Stop!"

"What?" Doyle looked at him, surprised to see the

hurt, bewildered look on Bodie's pale face.

"Don't take any more of your clothes off," Bodie begged, his hand outstretched. "Please."

Doyle sighed. This didn't need to be nearly as difficult as Bodie was trying to make it. To Ray it was all really quite simple; still he tried to reason with his mate. "Don't be so bleeding difficult. Let's just go to bed." Sliding his jeans and pants off his long legs, Ray added them to the pile that now held all of his clothes.

Sitting down on the bed, he held out his hand to Bodie, speaking with all the friendship and love he felt for his partner. "Come to me, sunshine."

Bodie made a sound in his throat that was somewhere between a whimper of pain and a groan of triumph.

"I can't resist you," he said, hoarsely, taking Doyle's offered hand. "Sweet Jesus, forgive me, but I just can't."

"You don't have to. I'm here for you." Doyle pulled on the hand a bit and Bodie knelt in the space between his spread legs. "I've been telling you that for an hour or more."

"Ray," he moaned again, "please, please kiss me."

Sliding both of his hands onto Bodie's face, Ray slowly lowered his lips to the wide pouting mouth trembling in wait for him. He wasn't sure what he expected, but he'd never thought it would feel so tender, or taste so good, or be so sweet.

Ray had kissed hundreds of women in his life and not a single one had ever moved him the way this one kiss did; more than profound, it was devastating. Bodie tasted like a fantasy lover, someone he'd never thought to have, yet waited for his whole life.

His spine tingled and his hands shook as he pulled back to look down at his mate, soon to be his lover.

Bodie's eyes were half closed, his mouth parted as he gasped for breath. The jet lashes lifted and Ray was stunned to the depth of his soul by the look of love and devotion in those dark blue eyes. His own heart melted.

"Very nice," Ray murmured softly, moving a finger to trace the pouty lips, "very nice, indeed."

Bodie buried his face in the fur on Ray's stomach, nuzzling him softly. Doyle held him for a couple of moments, soaking in the feel and taste of this man who meant so much to him. Bodie raised his head, his eyes sparkling with excitement. He pressed a lush, wet kiss to the middle of Ray's hairy chest. "Are you ready for this?"

Despite himself, Ray shivered slightly, but his voice was strong and steady as he responded. "Said so, didn't I?"

"So you did." Bodie stood, starting to strip off his clothes. Doyle heard several buttons hit the floor as the shirt came off the pale body with record speed. Bodie stood proudly before him, hands on his hips, his body displayed for Doyle's pleasure. He was very beautiful, Doyle thought suddenly. All that creamy, pale flesh, hard muscle, and almost no hair — except of course the dark thatch at his groin — all of it for him. The big, thick, rose-red cock jutted out from between his hips; quite a lance to be pierced with, Doyle thought whimsically.

"Okay, sunshine, prepare yourself. Once we do this there's no going back, you'll belong to me." More than a note of possessiveness was evident in Bodie's arrogant tone.

Something in the overly smug tone irked Doyle badly. "I'm not a piece of property to be owned, Bodie; know that now."

Bodie's smile softened. "No. You're a stropky, bad-tempered little sod, but I love you anyway and you'll still be mine."

Doyle wasn't sure he liked the claim of ownership, but it was so like Bodie. One moment he was

unsure, needing Doyle's love and approval. The next, he was staking a claim. Ray wondered idly if Bodie planned to carve his claim in his arse. *This man belongs to W.A.P. Bodie — woe unto thee who touched him. Be just like Bodie, wouldn't it?* Sighing, Ray moved backwards across the bed, draping himself over the pillows.

The blue eyes were both feral and possessive as Bodie crawled across the bed toward him; Doyle was thrilled and a bit frightened. But Bodie's hands were gentle as they reached for him, holding him tenderly; Doyle was kissed over and over again. Short kisses and long kisses, all of them sweet and loving. Bodie's tongue came seeking and was granted entrance at his lips. His mouth was plundered with such tenderness that Ray could only believe that every other kiss he'd ever been given was just practice for the real kisses he would receive from this man who meant so much to him and loved him so dearly. Not even kissing Ann had been this sweet or full of feeling.



Looking down tenderly at the man he held so closely, Bodie knew this was a dream come true. One he'd never in his wildest, most fanciful imaginings thought would be real. He was stunned by the sight of a beautiful, naked, and wanting Ray Doyle wrapped in his arms, waiting for loving — *his* loving.

All they had done so far was kiss, but Ray's green eyes were glazed with pleasure, his full lips slightly swollen and parted in invitation, the lean strong body pliant his arms. Bodie felt a wave of feeling too immense to comprehend wash over him. He'd been in love to begin with, now he was beyond that: Raymond Doyle owned his soul.

"Bodie?" Ray whispered, opening his lust-filled eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sunshine, just stopping for a look. Can't believe you're really here."

"Believe it." Ray smiled at him, the gentleness of the smile going straight to his heart. Ray wiggled in his arms. "Let's get on with things, hmm?"

"Your wish..." Bodie trailed off with a chuckle.

That filthy laugh of Ray's filled the room. "Can I have that in writing, mate?"

"It's only good for tonight," Bodie added hastily.

"What about tomorrow? Do I turn into a pumpkin then?"

"Fraid so, enjoy it while it lasts... pumpkin."

"If you value your life, you'd better rethink ever using that as a pet name," Ray threatened good-naturedly, trying to sit up. "I mean it, Bodie." Doyle's voice held more than a hint of warning.

"Won't," Bodie promised, knowing better than to push Ray on some subjects. He tightened his arms and held Ray down. "Didn't you say something about getting on with the proceedings?"

"Been waiting so long now, I thought you'd gone off me."

"Never," Bodie vowed and lowered his mouth back onto Doyle's.

Each kiss seemed sweeter than the last and Bodie savoured each one, tucking them away in his memory for when this dream ended. But for now he'd take what was offered and make love to his partner with all the skill and tenderness he could muster. Maybe it would be enough. And if it wasn't, if Ray walked away, even as destroyed by it as Bodie knew he would be, he'd still have the memory of this night to keep him warm, for all the lonely, cold nights that would come after.

Turning his head slightly, he moved his mouth to Ray's neck, licking and kissing around the underside of his jaw and then down to his collarbone. Ray murmured his pleasure at the action, dropping his head back to give Bodie better

access.

Bodie moved his cheek back and forth against the middle of the hairy chest, the fur soft and silky, just as he'd always known it would be. His mouth closed over the plump, dusky-rose coloured nipple that had been waiting for his tongue. It hardened at his first touch. He sucked the pebble-hard peak into his mouth, then released it and blew across it.

"Oh God," Ray groaned.

"Feel good?"

"You know it does." Ray arched his back in supplication and Bodie lowered his head back to Doyle's chest.

After a time, Bodie moved lower, nuzzling the furry belly. His tongue explored the little dip in Ray's stomach.

"Tickles," Ray laughed softly.

"Sorry," Bodie apologized, "do you want me to stop."

"Try it and your life won't be worth living."

"Best get back to it, then, hadn't I?"

"You talk too much."

Licking down Ray's torso, he completely skipped the groin area entirely, on his way to the muscular thighs. Ray groaned his displeasure.

"Now, now, wait for it."

"Been waiting," Doyle complained, thrusting his hips forward.

Bodie laughed and continued his explorations. The strong legs were gently massaged and kissed as Bodie made his way to the end of the bed. He took one of Ray's feet in his hands and licked down the instep.

Doyle jumped and wailed. "Jesus, Bodie!"

"More to come," Bodie promised, lowering his head to the strong ankle, kissing it softly.

"I want to come."

"Roll over," Bodie told him, stroking up the front of Ray's calf, enjoying the feel of the furry legs he was caressing. Doyle's legs were beautifully muscled and toned from years of running.

"Kay," came the uncertain answer, but Ray rolled over onto his stomach and spread his thighs, the invitation obvious.

The breath caught in Bodie's throat at the sight of Ray lying naked and vulnerable, waiting for him. Ray was also tense; he continued to massage the backs of Ray's calves and thighs.

"Relax, sunshine. We're not there yet, not even close."

Ray relaxed marginally and Bodie placed a kiss on the back of his knee. He relaxed a bit more as Bodie continued his explorations of the backs of Ray's thighs. Gently spreading the firm thighs further apart, he settled between them, nuzzling the fuzzy balls with his nose. Ray mewled softly.

"Please, Bodie."

"Wait for it, sunshine. Things are better when you wait for them." Bodie knew that only too well. He'd waited for this moment for what seemed like all his life and he wasn't going to rush through it now. Too many places yet to taste, smell, and touch.

Raising up a bit, he ran a hand softly over the perfect bum, loving the feel of the smooth, satiny skin over firm, round muscle. There were so many times when he'd had to physically restrain himself from reaching out and touching; now he was still half unbelieving that he would be allowed to have this liberty. He squeezed the globes.

"Hey, they're not melons," Doyle complained when

he'd either squeezed too hard or too long.

"Been waiting so long to get my hands on 'em."

"You've had your hands on my bum before," Doyle pointed out, looking over his shoulder at Bodie, amusement lighting the big green eyes.

"But I've permission now, it's different."

Doyle sighed and laid his head back on his hands. "Carry on."

"Oh, I will."

Petting the firm buttock, Bodie leant forward to place a kiss on the small of Doyle's back, he murmured in approval.

Unable to resist the lure, Bodie gently spread the round globes and looked down at the puckered pink muscle he hoped to plunder. The little anus looked virgin tight and far too small.

I wonder if I can manage fucking Ray without hurting him too badly. Maybe it would be better if Doyle fucked me this time and I do Doyle later, after I've had a chance to stretch him out a bit first.

Bodie's heart leapt at the very thought of being fucked by Doyle. It was another of his secret fantasies. Someplace deep inside went soft at the thought of Ray buried to the hilt inside him.

He planted a soft kiss on the little muscle and then chuckled as Ray surged forward and bellowed, "Bloody Christ! Bodie, warn a man when you're going to do something like that!" Doyle subsided back onto the bed.

"You didn't like it?" Bodie asked, disappointed.

"Surprised me, never felt anything like it. A lot of nerve endings right there. Think you might have hit more than a few of them."

Bodie pushed him back down, his tongue laving the tight little entrance as Ray writhed and whimpered

under the tender assault.

"Oh God, Bodie... please...," Doyle gasped out, "I can't take much more."

Taking pity on his partner, Bodie helped him over onto his back. His mouth watered at the sight of the straining cock rising proudly from between Ray's narrow hips, but he would not have that pleasure now. Now was for Doyle to have him.

"Want you to fuck me," Bodie told him, lying down and taking Ray into his arms.

"Thought you wanted to do me?"

"I do, but now's not the time. I'm too close and so are you. Virgin needs proper preparing."

"What about you?"

"Not a virgin, by any means."

"Knew that, but I don't want to hurt you either." Doyle sat up and looked back down at him; there was concern in the big green eyes.

"Don't worry, just use your fingers and a lot of lube first," Bodie advised. "My body remembers the ways and means of this sort of thing."

Bodie reached over to the night table drawer and pulled out the blue-and-white tube. Doyle took it from him with hands that trembled slightly. Putting the lube down on the bed, Doyle leant over to kiss the back of Bodie's neck, right at the hairline. Bodie shivered at the touch of those beloved lips.

"Never touched another man before; I want to do this right," Ray said hesitantly.

"Can't do it wrong, Ray. I want you so much, whatever you do will please me. I swear it."

"Let me do this in my own way. You've had your fun with me, let me have some learning about you."

"Thought you were about to come?"

"Stimulation stopped, I've calmed some." Doyle grinned. "Want to explore a bit."

Bodie's breath caught in his throat at the look in Doyle's eyes. He rolled over and spread his arms and legs apart. "I'm yours to do with as you please," he made sure his tone was light and bantering, but truer words he'd never spoken.

Ray ran both hands down his chest, feeling rather than caressing it. "Soft and hard at the same time," he said, almost to himself. He leant forward and placed a kiss in the middle of Bodie's chest and then moved his mouth to one of the tight nipples.

Bodie drew in a sharp breath as Ray closed his teeth gently on the peak.

"Like that, pet?"

"Gonna like anything you do to me."

Licking and kissing downward, Ray stopped to nip at one of his hips. Ray moved his head until he was right over Bodie cock; his tongue hesitantly slid out to lick the tip. Bodie wondered how he could feel such intense pleasure from just one lick, but it was Ray's tongue doing it. Doyle continued to lick along the length of his cock, long, soft strokes of his tongue that drove Bodie to the very peak. Ray's hot mouth closed over him, sucking gently on the tip of the cockhead. Bodie's head thrashed back against the pillow and he was unable to hold back; he came hard and hot into Doyle's mouth.

When he'd recovered a bit, he realized what he'd done. He hoped to God Ray wasn't so completely disgusted that he'd get up and leave. "Oh God, Ray, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"M fine, why are you sorry?"

"Came all over you," Bodie groaned miserably.

"Actually it was all in my mouth and it wasn't so bad. Different... salty, a bit bitter, but not bad." Ray took Bodie in his arms and kissed him. Bodie

could taste himself on Ray's mouth. *Oh, very sexy, that*, he decided. "Do you want to continue?"

"Are you kidding?" Bodie slid a hand down Ray's body and grasped the still hard and straining cock. "You want to fuck me now?"

"I'd like that."

Bodie tuned onto his side, shifting his leg up, to give Ray access to prepare him. Ray's fingers inside him brought him back to a fever pitch of arousal. By the time Ray had slipped his legs over the slender shoulders and positioned his cock at the entrance to Bodie's body he was desperate to feel that fat cock deep inside him.

It was every dream of heaven he'd ever had, Bodie decided as Ray slid deeply into him. There was no pain, only wave after wave of profound pleasure crashing over him. Spinning out, his mind reveled in the bliss and excitement of having his fondest wish come true.

He was coming again. "Ray, oh Jesus Christ, Ray... I love you!" Bodie gasped out as he came.

As he came aware again, he realized he was trying to breathe with a rather large and sweaty object lying on his chest. "You okay?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I've never been better." Bodie knew if he died now, he'd go wherever he was to go with no regrets and joy in his heart, completely satisfied with what life had given him.

As Ray lifted up and out of him, Bodie moaned softly at the loss of the thick cock from inside him. Ray seemed to understand that Bodie needed to be held right then, and he was enfolded in strong arms, cuddled, and kissed, tenderly.

"You were something else, pet," Ray whispered in his ear. The soft words meant the world to him; his heart almost burst with joy and unexpected tears pricked his eyes. He blinked them back rapidly;

this was not the time for that. "It's never been like that, never that good."

"Glad you enjoyed it, mate." Bodie didn't bother to hide the delight in his voice or his heart, knowing they must both show. But he could feel the semen trickling down the back of his thigh; much as he wanted to be held, he needed to clean up. "Need to clean myself up," Bodie said, starting to move out of Doyle's arms.

"Shouldn't I do it? I'm the one who made the mess." Doyle sat up and then leant forward to give Bodie another kiss.

Bodie lay back down and floated on a sea of happiness and contentment he'd never thought to know.



A single beam of light from the crack in the dark curtains hit the outside of Doyle's eyes and he woke, blinking. Warm and moist from being held so closely, Doyle smiled sweetly at the memory of last night. Bodie had made love to him within an inch of his life. It was the single most exquisite sexual experience he'd ever had and what was more, he couldn't wait to do it again.

Jesus Christ but I love that man, he thought wonderingly, and kissed the dark head that was presently lying against his shoulder. Bodie murmured softly and snuggled closer without waking. Smiling fondly down at Bodie, Ray wasn't even surprised to find himself very much in love with his partner this morning. There had always been so much feeling between them that all he'd really needed was a little nudge in the right direction, he reflected with a chuckle.

As Bodie shifted again, Ray heard his breathing change and knew he was awake. Raising his head, Bodie smiled sweetly at him and Doyle's heart jumped at the love and promise in the dark blue eyes.

"Morning, love," Ray whispered.

"Morning," Bodie replied and lowered his head to kiss Ray.

It was just a gentle good-morning kiss, but Ray felt it in his heart. "I love you."

"Yeah?" Bodie sounded startled.

"Yeah."

"When did this come about?" The words were said softly and without emotion, but his eyes were starting to twinkle.

"Sometime between last night and this morning."

"I see."

"You're not happy?"

"Course I am. Surprised too."

"I bet."

"You know, once you're mine, I'll not let you go again."

"Possessive, are you?"

"Very."

"What about what's mine, mate?" Ray asked. "Did you think I might be a bit possessive too?"

"I don't know. Only know about me."

"Then I'll tell you. Don't even think about going off to Paris or anywhere else for that matter. You're mine now. If you leave, I'll hunt you down and bring you back. And then you'll be in big trouble."

"Gonna punish me?" Bodie chuckled.

"I have a bad temper, as well you know."

"Don't I just."

"I wouldn't rouse it if I were you."

"I won't try and leave you," Bodie promised.

"What about last night?"

"Uh... what about last night?"

"You were leaving then."

Bodie was silent and something about the silence triggered Doyle's curiosity. He had a feeling about that, now that he'd had a bit of time to consider. "You were leaving last night, weren't you?"

"Uh..."

"Bodie?"

"I couldn't leave," he admitted. "I wasn't packing, I was unpacking."

"Unpacking?"

"I was feeling bad about your date with the lovely Claire and I'd gotten a call from a friend — someone who calls me now and again, just to see if I'm interested in a job. Says, be in Paris the day after tomorrow and there's a job doing this or that, if you're interested." Bodie didn't meet his eyes and looked embarrassed.

"Go on, finish it."

"I packed up and was ready to go, but I couldn't. I'd just unzipped the suitcase when you showed up."

"You weren't going to leave."

"No! It's not like it was the first time I've done it, either," Bodie admitted, looking away from Ray.

"You mean packed to leave?"

"Yeah, every now and then I get to feeling really down and the hopelessness of the situation gets to me." Bodie sighed. "I pack up the essentials and start to leave for Paris."

"What's in Paris, anyway?"

"Got some friends there who run referrals for merc jobs all over the world. They're always calling to ask if I'm interested. Seems there's always jobs for the likes of me."

"Not anymore there aren't." Doyle made sure his tone left no doubt about that.

"And you called me possessive," Bodie laughed, his blue eyes twinkling happily.

"You don't know the meaning of the word." Ray returned his smile. "Which reminds me — why the hell did you let me believe you were leaving?"

Bodie hung his head. "Wanted to see what you'd say."

"Got more than you bargained, for didn't you?"

"I got my fondest wish and desire."

"Under false pretenses."

"You really narked?"

"I could be," Doyle said, smiling evilly down at his mate. "You're going to have to work hard to make it up to me."

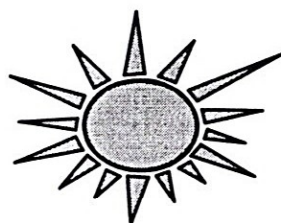
"What can I do?"

"I'm sure I'll think of something over the next couple o'dozen years."

"That long?"

"Yeah, forever if you'll have me."

"Yeah, forever."



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